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STAR IN THE WILLOWS



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Illustrations



"Hello there! Where did you pop from?" . . *frontispiece*

The horses splashed through the water . . *facing page 48*

Nita hung on, somehow *facing page 96*

She tucked the coat around him *facing page 144*

Chapter I

HELLO there! Where did you pop up from all of a sudden? Buck and I weren't expecting company down here at the corral."

The girl with the taffy-colored bangs, the cow-boots and jeans, turned from the horse she was unsaddling to glance in mild surprise at a small figure that stared through the fence rails with solemn eyes.

When there was no answer to her question, when the owner of the big black eyes just kept on staring and scooping little holes in the earth with her bare brown toes, the girl in jeans nodded, understandingly.

"Oh, I bet you belong to the Mexican family that moved in last night. You don't understand English, is that it? Well then, I'll start in all over again—*Buenas dias!* How's that, better? My name's Louise Sherwood. Lou for short. My father owns this ranch. It was he and my brother Bill who drove you up from the railway station."

With a little laugh that wrinkled her freckled, snub nose she added, "Now I had better give you a chance. What's your name?"

"Elena Valdez, senorita. Elenita, sometimes, but Nita, more often—for short, as you say. I am happy that you understand my language. I like to talk, too. It is no fun to be dumb."

The black eyes looked a shade less solemn now and Lou was quick with further encouragement.

"You'll get along all right. Lots of people in California speak Spanish. Specially on ranches like this where we are all old-timers."

Lou was busy for a moment unbuckling her horse's headstall and loosening the cinch and then she announced, "Horses and dogs are my favorite things in the whole world. How about you?"

"Dogs I like very much, but it is with burrochitos instead of horses that I am best acquainted. They are most gentle you understand, and small—just up to here."

Lou's gray eyes made a critical inspection of the other's bedraggled ankle-length skirt with its flounce of shabby ruffles.

"Is that the kind of a rig you ride in down in Mexico?"

"Si, and why not? When one sits sidesaddle there is no difficulty." And then apologetically, "I am not always so dirty as at this moment, senorita. The train took a long, long time to get here. There was much dust and soot—and have you ever tried to eat frijoles, or tamales and chili sauce, when the car is making a sudden jiggle,

jiggle around a curve? It is difficult, let me tell you. Most difficult! But that is a small matter now. As soon as a hot day comes along so that our clothes will dry quickly, Tia Lupe and I plan a fine big washing in the river."

Lou's eyebrows arched. She looked as though she were ready to explode with an astonished, "My goodness! Is that your only dress?" but she checked herself hurriedly and changed the subject by leaning down to pat a brown, droopy-eared hound that had squeezed under the fence and bounded to her with a wagging tail and enthusiastic licks of its pink tongue.

"Nice old Bugle!" she said fondly, then explained, "He is Bill's dog, really, but he's what you'd call a family-minded pooch. He likes us all."

There was a lull in the conversation. Lou turned Buck into the field just beyond the corral. Then she picked up her saddle and started to lug it toward the barn. She stopped, as Nita asked a shy question.

"Excuse me, senorita, but before you go away, can you tell me please if all those mountains over there are part of Rancho Estrellas?"

"Yes," Lou nodded, as Nita pointed to the dark peaks that rimmed the west.

"The little hills, too, and the valley, and the river?"

"Of course."

"But senorita, then how is there room for any one else to live in California if so much of it belongs to just one person?"

Lou smiled. Her sun-bleached lashes made a gilt fringe around her bright, amused eyes.

"Did you really think we were that greedy? No, there is plenty of land left. Why, our ranch isn't half as big as some. It's good enough for us, though. Mom and Pa and Bill and I would rather live here than any place else on the whole map," and then hastily, so that there would be no danger of misunderstanding, "Oh, I guess Mexico is all right, too, but you know how it is—"

"Yes, I know well. Where ever it is home, that is the best place of all, *senorita*."

There was another silence. Nita was back again in the little hot village of Nueva. She was remembering the palm-shaded plaza. The fountain pool where she had so often dabbled her tired dusty feet. The white pigeons she had fed with lunch crumbs from what she called the cupboard pocket of her skirt.

She was remembering the tall old church where a gilded statue of Our Lady smiled down from a candle-lit niche. Because it was a good place to catch the tourist trade, she had stood on its sun-baked steps every day with her market basket.

"Limes for sale! Juicy limes! Avocados! Jasmine! Heliotrope! Carnations! Only a peso, please. Only a peso."

Then too, there had been Tio Felipe's blue painted adobe house sticking up like a chip of turquoise in the middle of the parched field where he worked so hard.

And how could she forget the sleepy shallow stream with its tiny hut of reeds and mud and sticks where she had been born the winter that Papa tended sheep across the far bank?

Such a nice Papa, according to hearsay. Sad indeed that he and Mama had been called to Paradise before she was old enough to know them for herself.

But now, what was the yellow-haired senorita saying?

Nita's homesick memories were abruptly interrupted as Lou slid the barn door open.

"Would you like to come in and look at another one of our horses while I hang up my saddle?" she asked hospitably, and at Nita's quick acceptance she led the way through the dim, hay-sweet barn to a box stall.

"This is our palomino brood mare," she said, patting the rippled mane of a golden-skinned horse that looked down on her out of dark soft eyes and nuzzled against her cheek with a whinny of welcome. "She is waiting for the blacksmith to shoe her. That's why she is in here instead of running out on the hills."

Nita's face glowed. She caught her breath with a gasp of awed admiration.

"Oh! Oh! Has she a name, senorita?"

"Yes, Hermosa. Pa chose it. He is crazy about her. We all are. She's tops. Pa bought her, and broke her, when she was just a filly, and he said 'Beautiful One' was the only name in the whole Spanish language good enough for her. Would you like to pat her? Go ahead."

Nita reached out an eager hand to touch the mare's silvery flow of mane and Lou laughed with pride.

"I can see you are stuck on her all right. I don't blame you, and you aren't the only one, either. You ought to see all the people who come out here and try to talk Pa into selling her."

Nita whirled to stare incredulously. "Sell her? You would do such a terrible thing, *senorita*?"

Lou shrugged. "What do you think my father runs Rancho Estrellas for—fun? Not on your life! For three square meals a day. If a person is hard up for money he can't afford to hold on to a horse just because it's beautiful. But don't look so worried. We won't part with her just yet a while. She is going to foal around Christmas time and everything depends on what happens. Golly, if only she'll throw a good colt!"

Hesitating for a moment she laughed a trifle awkwardly. "I guess you will think this is silly, but you see, in the old days, Californios used to believe that a golden colt, a true palomino, was a good luck sign for the ranch where it was born. A hundred times better'n any old four leaf clover or rabbit's foot. They counted on it, for certain sure, to bring rain and lots of grass and everything else that a cattleman needs in his business."

Then with a sigh as though it were a relief to unburden herself, "Luck has sort of run out around Rancho Estrellas lately, and we're keeping our fingers

crossed. Golden colts only show up in a blue moon you know."

"But, *senorita*, surely you are joking?" Nita interrupted bewilderedly. "Are you not rich to own this fine rancho? All the cattle and horses and the big house up there under the oaks? Think of the dollars your father, *el patron*, pays out to my Tio Felipe and to all the *vaqueros*. Dollars if you please, instead of centavos! As for rain, buckets of it fell on our heads as we got off the train yesterday. And look at the grass like a green rug on the hills."

Lou made a disgusted grimace out of the cobwebbed window. "Do you call that grass?" she asked scornfully. "That little old short stuff all bitten down with frost? Well, maybe it looks all right to some one who doesn't know anything about California, but just wait and see what happens when summer comes. You'll find out what a dry year means once the cattle start bawling and we have to buy hay and cottonseed cake to keep their ribs from poking through their hides. Bought feed costs money, see? Lots of it. My father will have to borrow from the bank and a rancher can't keep on doing that very often, let me tell you."

With another glance out of the window she added curtly, "Don't talk to me about yesterday, either. There wasn't enough rain to give a flea a bath. Not nearly enough to soak in and do any good. We haven't had

anything but measly old drizzles all winter long, and last year was just as bad. And you needn't think a big house means we are rich—not when it's just the same old place my grandfather built, with most of the paint off. Oh yes, and about those dollars you think are so wonderful—don't you know that's the way all ranch hands get paid in los Estados Unidos now that hired help is scarcer'n hens' teeth?"

With a last pat and a hug for Hermosa, Lou turned to the door. "Maybe it is hard for a newcomer like you to catch on to the way things are going around here," she threw back over her shoulder. "But don't fool yourself. We need plenty of luck and we need it *pronto*. *Muy pronto*. If Hermosa gives us a gold colt it will be the best Christmas present that Rancho Estrellas ever had in its whole life."

She walked out of the barn abruptly with a swaggering clump-clump of her high-heeled boots, her chin determinedly raised.

Nita watched her go with wide surprised eyes. Was it possible that everybody, no matter who, had troubles of one kind or another?

Wishing suddenly that she could help matters in some small way, perhaps make the oh-so-nice Americana smile again, she hurried after Lou. Running across the corral she sprang up on the fence and, without a thought for splinters in her bare feet, climbed to the top rail as nimbly as a brown monkey.

"Wait, senorita. Behold the balloon ascension!"

With her arms outstretched, her skirts and her long braids flying, she made a clownish leap into mid air and then collapsed rapidly with a little shriek, in a muddy puddle.

"Next time get a parachute!"

It was worth the wet hard bump to hear Lou's shout of laughter as she ran back to help Nita to her feet. They stood giggling for a moment and then Lou hooked an arm through Nita's with a determined, "Come on. Let's go up to the house. I'll lend you a pair of jeans so your skirt will have a chance to dry. It will have to be a last year's, outgrown pair, I guess. You're lots smaller than I am."

With frank interest she inspected Nita's tiny waist, her pipestem ankles and the thin arms.

"How old are you?"

"I am ten. I will be eleven in January."

"The same here, only my birthday isn't until February. You are a whole month older even if you are only pint size. But come on. That's my mother over there in the yard. She'll want to meet you."

As the girls walked into a picket fenced garden a pretty woman in a red and white checked apron smiled at them. She leaned her hoe against a lilac bush, pushed a strand of blonde hair out of her eyes and shook hands with Nita as Lou made the introductions.

"How do you do? I am glad you arrived safely after

such a long trip. Are you getting comfortably settled down at the cottage? Please tell your mother I will pay her a little visit this afternoon. I want to be sure she has plenty of bedding. Our early spring nights are cold, you know."

"Gracias, senora, but it is Tia Lupe and Tio Felipe with whom I live. I do not have a mother or father."

"Oh, I see. Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"No, senora, but I have Roberto and Salvador, my cousins, you understand. They are twins—big boys, almost men, and then there is the Cockerel."

"The wha—at?" Lou was mystified.

"Tia's baby, senorita. A fine fat one who wakes us all every morning at sunrise crowing for his breakfast."

Mrs. Sherwood's blue eyes twinkled. "I think it's just as well your cottage is a good way down the road. Now don't forget to tell your aunt I will see her this afternoon."

She went back to her weeding, and Lou took Nita up the steps of a white sprawling house where a tangle of rose vines and wistaria draped the green-shuttered windows and foamed off the eaves.

They crossed a screened porch and walked through a big living room where an oak log smouldered on the hearth. Lou's bedroom was at the end of a hall that ran through the middle of the house. Starched curtains gave it a fresh, wash-day fragrance. A strip of faded flowery

carpet was laid on the floor by the four-poster bed, and a wood box and a black iron stove stood in one corner. A mirror hung opposite over a tall chest that was littered with a framed snapshot of Buck, a half-eaten apple, an oil lamp, a brush and comb, a pocket knife and a gopher trap.

Lou began to rummage in the drawers. "Help yourself to what ever fits best," she urged, tossing out one garment after another. "I hope you don't mind patches. Most of these I got second hand from Bill."

Then as Nita took off her skirt and blouse and slipped into a pair of jeans and a neatly darned blue shirt, she exclaimed admiringly, "You look keen—just like a boy. You could fool anyone if it weren't for your braids."

She banged the drawers shut and ran to the closet. "Now I'll see if I can dig up some shoes." Her back was turned and she did not see the sudden painful flush that burned Nita's cheeks, nor the panic and the guilt in her eyes.

"Do—do you think so, *senorita*?"

Sick and shaken, Nita could scarcely bring out the words. Oh—oh—was her secret to be discovered? Suppose the Americana should guess what had happened at the border—at that fearsome fence where *Mejico* stopped and *los Estados Unidos* began!

As clearly as though she held it in her hands, Nita

could see her passport. The word 'sobrino' stood out on it blackly, boldly. 'Sobrino' instead of 'sobrina'. Only the letter O instead of A for an ending, but it meant that she had been changed by a slip of a pen into Tio Felipe's nephew instead of his niece.

Some stupid, careless *official* back in Nueva was to blame. Tio had discovered the dreadful mistake just before the train reached the border. There was no time for a correction. He had explained to her, gravely, the difficulties and the delays of something called red tape. It was a matter of law. The passport authorities would never, never in this world, permit Nita to leave the country until her papers were entirely in order.

Alas, he had said, those authorities were long-winded busy-bodies, slow as snails and twice as brainless. They sat at their desks and tangled the simplest problem into hard knots.

Would they care how long the Valdez family kicked its heels waiting to enter los Estados Unidos? Not in the least. No, and they would not give so much as one small snap of their fingers if Tio were to lose the splendid job that was all arranged for him in California.

What was it to them that Juan Castro, Tio's old-time friend, had written, "Hurry, hurry! Life on Rancho Estrellas is too good to miss. You will never be poor again. You will never be hungry. El patron's wages will change all that for you and your family, but do not waste one minute I implore you. Take the money el

patron advances and buy train tickets at once. If you do not come immediately there are plenty of other men in Nueva who will jump at the chance."

Daringly, desperately, Tio Felipe had taken matters into his own hands.

Tugging on his straggly *mustachio* and considering the matter deeply, he had at last managed a smile for Nita out of his little shrewd black eyes.

"Do not look so troubled, *querida mia*. Red tape is easily cut. All we need is our wits for scissors. If your passport calls for a *sobrino*, well then, that is what you shall be."

An hour later she had walked off the train and through a big bustling station in a pair of ragged overalls borrowed from the twins, with a wide-brimmed straw sombrero covering every wisp of her tucked up hair.

While her heart pounded and her legs trembled she had stood in the long line of travellers who gave up their papers for inspection and then were permitted to file through a gate in the high wire fence that marked the magic boundary line.

There had been a soldier on guard at the gate. A soldier with a gun. If she were lucky, if it turned out that he had a soft heart, perhaps he would not shoot her dead, but most certainly he would send her back to Nueva in disgrace the moment her crime was discovered. He would throw Tio Felipe into jail, too. Kind,

good Tio who had no wish to break the law, but who would not for the world have abandoned her, gone on to California without her, no matter how fine a job he saw slipping out of his grasp.

"Try these. They pinch me like fury."

A pair of stout brown oxfords hurtled out of the closet and whizzed dangerously close to Nita's head, but she did not pay them the slightest attention.

She was reminding herself, over and over, that Tio had urged her not to worry. He had insisted that the affair was ended once and for all. Who, in a great important country like *los Estados Unidos* would have the slightest interest as to whether it had been a boy or a girl who had crossed that border line? How, possibly, would the secret ever leak out? Who would give it away?

Oh, doubtless Tio was right, but if only, only, she could feel safe deep in her own heart! Tio did not know that a bad dream bothered her every night. It was about a jail, like one she had heard of in Nueva, with bars at the window and a filthy floor where prisoners slept on straw and felt the cold, creeping feet of rats.

"How about the shoes? Are they O.K.? You had better wear them around the corral. You might pick up a horseshoe nail or something, and besides, you'll feel lots warmer."

There was a steady stream of muffled remarks from

the depth of the closet and then Lou finally emerged. "Here's a sweater to try on. It shrunk the last time I washed it. I got the water too hot."

Nita swallowed hard, and steadied her lips.

"It will fit me perfectly, *senorita*, and I like red the best of all colors."

She held the sweater against herself and stood on tiptoe to look in the mirror, wondering uneasily if Lou had noticed anything wrong.

Glad of an excuse to get away, she sniffed hard at the good smell of meat and frying potatoes drifting from the rear of the house.

"Your dinner, *senorita*? Then I must go at once. Never have I known a morning to pass so quickly. Tia Lupe will think I have fallen in the river and drowned."

Bundling her skirt and blouse under her arm she said a hurried goodbye. Lou followed her to the gate, waving adios, and then ran to the kitchen to find her mother.

"Isn't she nice, Moms? Did you ever hear any one so polite in all your life? Every other word was 'thank you.' And then calling me *senorita*! I just wish Bill had heard her. It's about time he got another name for me besides Brat or Pug Nose."

Then as her mother smiled sympathetically, Lou gave a little pleased skip into the dining room and began to set the table.

“Just think, Mom,” she called back above the rattle of knives and forks, “won’t it be fun? I’ll have a girl on the ranch to play with! Not that a person with a brother, and a horse, and lots of other animals, gets lonesome exactly, but just the same——”

Chapter II

“**T**IA! Tia! Our guests!”
Nita, who had been watching at the front window, raced to the door of the little white-washed cottage on the creek bank. Plump, brown Tia Lupe hastily slammed a pot of coffee on the stove, smoothed her black skirt, snatched the Cockerel from his crib, and waddled after her.

Mrs. Sherwood was coming up the path. She was leading a black cow at the end of a halter, and at the same time she was clutching a large cardboard hatbox from whose hole-punched lid strange peeping and scratching sounds floated.

A newborn calf trotted docily at its mother's heels, and Lou brought up the rear of the procession staggering under the weight of a bulging burlap sack.

“Whew, that's heavy!” she exclaimed, dumping her load with a thud on the porch steps. “We thought you might like some walnuts and almonds and dried apricots from our orchard, see?”

“And this is Julia, and her son Thomas,” Mrs. Sherwood said, introducing everyone formally. “I do not

know just how Julia got her name. Thomas, of course, is in honor of our chore boy. You will have plenty of milk to drink, Senora Valdez, and to make cheese and butter, and I am sure that we have an extra churn somewhere around that you may borrow if you like."

Then, as Julia tugged on her halter, "Now, now, stand still and act like a lady. This is your new home. You are lucky to live with such agreeable people, to say nothing of a chance to learn Spanish—and just look at that cunning baby! Did you ever see such big black eyes? Such a lot of hair for a little fellow?"

Mrs. Sherwood admired the Cockerel, and won a beaming smile from Tia Lupe, and then she handed the hatbox to Nita. "Careful, don't drop it. There are half a dozen young turkeys inside. You had better put them under the kitchen stove. They need to keep good and warm while they're so tiny, you know. Do you suppose that your uncle could make some kind of a coop for them? If you get a place ready, I will bring down some laying hens, too."

"Oh, but we do not need a coop, senora! Already there is a most excellent house waiting for them."

Nita pointed eagerly to a small shed that adjoined the kitchen door. Tio Felipe, on a tour of the premises that morning, had discovered that it housed a truly magnificent shower bath arrangement.

In a bold moment of experimentation he turned a handle. *Dios mio*, what a mistake! Tio had had the

dousing of his life as an icy stream poured down on his head. Frantically, he had twisted the treacherous handle this way, that way, until he mastered it at last. By that time he was drenched, and ankle-deep in water as a veritable flood backed up from the clogged drains.

When the excitement was over, and he had been revived with a hot breakfast, Tia Lupe laid down the law. Not one member of her family was to set foot near that most dangerous geyser again. Not one, mind, now. They could do their bathing when summer came. The river would be good enough for anybody.

Now, with a housing problem to be solved, Nita was anxious to show the senora that the Valdez family was an entirely practical one.

"Surely the little turkeys and the chickens and Julita and Tomas could live there, comfortably, out of the cold and rain?"

Mrs. Sherwood shook her head regretfully. She did not dare exchange glances with Lou. Only her eyes were laughing as she answered.

"No, I really think it would be best to have your uncle build them a combination cow barn and coop. They'd like that. A sort of apartment house, you know."

Nita did not have the slightest idea as to what an apartment house might be, but the idea sounded sociable and pleasant even though she was more than a little disappointed that the senora did not see eye to eye with her about the shower bath shed.

Think of having Julita and the so darling Tomasio right outside the door! A milk supply at first hand. Think of the turkeys and their tail feathers, so convenient, in an emergency, for a duster! Think of eggs, snatched at the first sound of a cackle, and dropped in the skillet before the hens had time to turn around!

With a sigh, Nita abandoned these delightful possibilities. She and Lou tethered Julia to a tree and then took the hat box inside while Tia and Mrs. Sherwood sat down at the kitchen table to enjoy a cup of coffee and the little cakes that Tia had made that morning from the supplies she had found waiting on well-stocked shelves.

Tia Lupe did not talk very much. She rocked the Cockerel and stared at her guest out of black, expressionless eyes, but when Mrs. Sherwood declared it was time to go home, she pulled her round self out of the chair and shuffled in leather sandals to a basket that hung from a nail on the wall.

"For you, senora, if you will do me the honor of accepting it," she said, presenting Mrs. Sherwood with a thick roll of crocheted lace. "You have been good to us. Allow that I say thank you in this small way."

"And this is for you, senorita." Nita ran to her room and brought back a painted clay bowl from the packing case that served as a bureau. "I made it myself. It is useful for holding buttons and pins."

When the Sherwoods left with many thanks for their gifts and a promise to call again soon, Nita walked to the end of the path with them, and then she turned back to chat a while with Julita and Tomas. She was extremely pleased about the black cow and calf. They added a distinct air to the yard. In Nueva, did not owning a cow mean that you were most prosperous, most high up in the world?

Truly a joy to exhibit them to Tio Felipe and the boys when they came back from work at supper time. They had been gone all day. Juan Castor, delighted at their safe arrival on Rancho Estrellas, had rattled up in a truck and taken them off to superintend their new duties. To start with, they would set posts, and stretch wires around the steer field where the old fence was in need of mending.

While she waited for them, she wandered to the creek bank. Juan had told Tio that in a normal rainy season the river deserved its name of el Diablo as it roared along in a swift murky torrent, even though in summer it quieted to a gentle murmur. Summer was a long way off though, it was plain to see. The willows were nothing but dead sapless sticks, and the cottonwoods made her shiver, standing so nakedly with their feet in the cold water.

Idly, Nita began to think about the senorita. Such pretty eyes she had, with their grayness and their hint

of green. She herself was tired of plain black ones. Tired of straight dark hair, too. How truly fortunate to have the kind that curled on the ends, all light and fluffy!

As to the Americana's worry about hard times, that was something most puzzling to understand. Did the *senorita* know what she was talking about? Had she ever seen a flour bin scraped to its splintery bottom? An empty frijole sack? Had she ever gone to bed with her stomach flat against her backbone? Ever picked scraps from a garbage heap—stale tortillas, perhaps, or a bit of meat?

Honk! Honk!

The rancho truck careened down the hill. There was no more time to ponder over the *senorita's* hard-to-grasp problems.

As Roberto and Salvador jumped out they waved their *sombreros*, and grinned with a shine of white teeth, and began to shout an exciting account of the day's adventures.

"Alas, that you were not with us, Nita. Imagine, if you please, all the wild creatures we have seen. Deer! A coyote! Rabbits! Squirrels! Birds, too, Nita—red-tailed hawks, and larks, and blue jays."

Each boy tried to outdo the other, and it was Salvador who exclaimed dramatically, "Yes, and we saw tracks of a mountain lion, too, my little cousin! Right up there, we saw them, in that patch of brush just below the peak. Los Viperos peak, it is called, you under-

stand, Nita, for it is alive with great long snakes bigger than—than this.”

He stretched his arms apart as widely as possible, and Roberto nodded in agreement. “It is true about the snakes, but the lions are even worse.” Impressively, he nodded toward the hills that were darkening with twilight. “That is where they live. They come down from the high mountains at night time. They slip through the brush and pounce on calves, or sometimes horses. Juan says so. Does he not know everything about the rancho? Well then, there can be no mistake, Nita. You should hear him make the lion’s chewing-up noise—it is most terrible—like this—grrrrr!”

He gnashed his teeth, and snarled wickedly, delighted that Nita was taking his words so seriously. She was actually pale as she turned to Juan who had climbed out of the truck with Tio and joined the boys.

“Oh! You mean that there are beasts loose who might eat us if they got a chance?”

Juan nodded matter-of-factly. “But most certainly, little one. What do you expect in this wilderness? The lions would set upon you just the way I expect to snap at my supper when Tia Lupe sets it out. Oh, to be sure, they perhaps might not eat you down to the very last crumb. More than likely, if they were not starving, they would merely tear you apart and leave the rest for the vultures.”

Tio Felipe thought it was time to change the con-

versation. Frowning at Juan and the grinning boys, he laid a reassuring hand on Nita's shoulder.

"Do not listen to another word, *querida*. Never have I heard such foolish tall tales. Next thing you know, we will be having one of those lions walking in our front door and sitting down at the supper table. Only, if the story is left to these rascals, we will all be thrashing around in his belly while he warms his paws at the fire and smokes my *cigarrillos*."

Nita joined in the laughter a trifle uncertainly. Jokes were fun, but just the same, if the boys had seen paw tracks it was grim proof that the dusky hills, so dangerously close, held terrors far worse than el patron's prize bellowing bulls, or even rattlesnakes.

She walked close beside Tio Felipe until they were safely in the little house with the door closed. Supper was good. Tia Lupe had a fine chance to show off her cooking now with all her bounteous supplies. Juan, who was a bachelor, had arranged to eat his meals with them. You were well filled by the food at the bunk house where the Americano ranch hands ate, he explained, but there was no flavor to it. Not enough lard and cheese. No bite of chile peppers, no zest of basil or thyme.

Afterwards, when the dishes were washed, there was a game of cards and an appreciative munching of Lou's nuts, and then Juan yawned himself away and everyone settled down to bed.

Drowsily, Nita listened to the rush of the stream

below the bluff. A night bird whistled from an oak tree. A coal in the stove dropped to its bed of graying ashes. And—and—oh, what was that?

Stiffening under the blankets she heard a sudden rustle of bushes outside the window, a stirring, and a heavy breathing in the darkness. With a terrified moan she pulled the blankets over her head. Then almost at once her cot began to shake and squeak. She was no longer quaking with fear, she was bouncing up and down with a fit of giggles.

"It is Julita," she shrieked, wakening the entire household. "It is our poor Julita—not a lion! We forgot to milk her. She is trying to remind us."

Loud, plaintive moos sounded again at the front door, and Tio Felipe and the boys rushed outside shivering in their nightshirts, although Tio took the precaution of donning his hat as a safeguard against the night air.

Tia Lupe, wrapped in a comforter, her black braids falling loose from their usual neat coil, ran after them with a pitcher, while Nita, in her chemise, threw her arms around Julita's neck and apologized profusely.

Bowing low, and sweeping off his sombrero, Tio approached the black cow with a certain hesitancy.

"I must beg you to forgive me, gracious senora, if my procedure is not entirely correct," he said gravely. "I am sure that you will make allowances when you understand my lack of experience. How simple it would be,

if only you were a goat. But stand still, will you, please? Ah, splendid! Splendid! That is most helpful. You see, Lupe? You see, Nita—Roberto—Salvador? You see what excellent co-operation I am receiving?"

Luckily, Tomas, who was standing along side his mother, had not sucked her udders dry at supper time, so in another minute there was a fine hiss and rattle into the pitcher. There was such a flow, indeed, that Tio allowed himself a little joke in memory of his morning's shower bath.

He aimed at the boys with a well directed squirt and both of them got a wet warm stream in their sleepy astonished brown faces. Nothing would do then, after they had licked the drops away, laughing uproariously, but that cups be brought and everyone have a good drink.

When they went back in the house at last the Cockerel was wide awake sucking his thumb and staring out of his crib with disapproving eyes, and the box of turkeys under the stove seemed actually alive, there was so much scurrying and peeping going on inside.

Nita peeked through the lid. Tia had stuffed the box with an old petticoat to keep them warm, and had given them a supper of mush, but they looked so mournful and forlorn crowded together in a scrawny, pin-feathered huddle, that Nita was sorry for them.

"I will take them to bed with me," she decided. "I will pull the covers over their box and then there will not

be the slightest danger of cold. Besides, they will not be so lonely. After all, this is their first night away from home."

Once more the house quieted.

Nita had to curl herself into a small cramped ball to make room for the hatbox, but she did not mind. It was pleasant to hear the little turkeys peeping drowsily and then to know that they had settled down to cozy silence. When she began to think about it, however, the silence was a little bit worrying. By any mischance might they have suffocated and quietly died?

She thought it a good idea to get up and take an anxious look. Lighting a candle, and feeling quite motherly and responsible, she turned back an edge of the blanket and peered through the punched lid holes. No, the turkeys were not at all dead. Their health was of the most robust.

"Nita—! Go back to bed!"

Tia hissed ominously from the next room, and Nita pinched the candle and jumped under the covers. It was necessary to get up once more, however, this time because the blanket seemed to be spread entirely over the hatbox and not at all on her toes.

While she was tucking it in, she could not resist a glance out of the window.

Rancho Estrellas slept peacefully. Doubtless, in the barn down below, where moonlight lay so coldly on the tin roof, Hermosa the mare was dreaming about

the colt that was coming at Christmas time. She hoped the *senorita* would get the little golden horse her heart was set upon. Somehow, tonight, she wanted everyone in the whole world to be pleased.

Things had gone well for the Valdez family their first twenty-four hours in California. She had to admit that Tio was right about leaving his stony field, his broken-down cart, his poor worn-out burro.

Perhaps her homesickness was like any other illness. Perhaps it would pass and be forgotten. Already there was something about the stars and the moonlight, the river's song, and the smell of sage and tar weed blowing off the hills that made her feel happier than any other time since she had left Nueva.

She would not be troubled with bad dreams tonight. She knew now that she was safe at last. Yes, for on this vast rancho where there was room for cattle and horses and dogs, for turkeys and chickens and even for snakes and mountain lions, surely no one would begrudge a haven to Tio's pint-size *sobrina*.

Chapter III

TIME had a way of flying at Rancho Estrellas, Nita discovered. The late cold spring gave up its hold on the hills. Frost went out of the ground. The river quieted and nesting linnets began to quarrel over bits of string and horsehair. Even the stars were different. They were warm and yellow like little tapers, instead of icy diamonds.

Every day Nita picked bouquets of yellow poppies and blue lupine and pink paintbrush from hillsides and canyons as flowery as the market stalls had been in Nueva, and every day she shooed Tia's turkeys and hens out of the vegetable patch where corn and beans and squash sprouts were poking through the warm earth. Then when the grapevine that grew over the cottage door threw out its clinging tendrils, and when the cottonwoods rustled their heart-shaped leaves, she knew that summer was on the way.

There were no more wild flowers. The short sparse grass withered under a blazing sun. Roberto and Tio and Salvador were glad of their big straw sombreros.

Glad to wipe sweat from their faces as they worked in the fields, instead of shivering and blowing their noses under a raw spring wind.

Vacation time came for Lou and her brother. When school started again in September Nita and the twins were going, too. Already the boys were bursting with English phrases they had picked up, but Nita was too shy to say a word.

As she perched on the corral fence one morning and waited for Lou to come out of the barn, she wished that she were brave enough to speak out with a fine loud "Thank you" to the whole Sherwood family.

What a lot of time they spent thinking up kind things to do for other people! Take the senorita, for instance, had invited Nita to go on a picnic this morning. Just the two of them, except for the horses, of course.

It would be Nita's first ride.

"It is time you saw more of the ranch than just the part around the house and the barns," Lou had declared. "You can try Colorado. He is that old red roan that hangs around the corral every night looking for barley. You'll like him. I promise he won't kick or prance or hardly swish his tail. You won't have to worry a bit. He's got loads of sense."

While Nita waited on the fence, growing more excited and nervous every minute at the thought of a saddle under her, Mr. Sherwood walked through the corral on his way to the blacksmith shed.

"Waiting for Lou, are you? I hear you are going to ride Colorado." He smiled under the wide brim of his battered hat as he looked down into Nita's rather anxious face. "Would you like me to stick around and give you a boost up? Well then, when Lou brings your horse I'll help you climb aboard and we'll have Colorado walk you around the corral a couple of times until you get the hang of things."

Nita was deeply grateful and much relieved. El patron could surely toss her into the saddle a great deal more easily than she could scramble up herself. Of course the senorita would not be mean enough to laugh but just the same a person felt foolish trying something for the first time. Burrocitos might be slow, even stubborn, occasionally, and of course people always laughed at their ears and their hee-haws, but they were entirely amiable and dependable creatures. No matter what anybody said, she considered horses to be much too high off the ground.

Lou appeared with Buck, who was already saddled, and after she had tied him to the fence she led Colorado into the corral.

"Bill said you could use this old saddle of his any time you want," she told Nita as she tugged hard at latigo straps to tighten the cinch, and then pushed a clinking bit between Colorado's old yellow teeth. "No thanks, Pa, I'm all set. You help Nita."

Swinging into her own saddle she watched her father

show Nita how to grasp the reins, grip the pommel, and throw a leg over Colorado's back.

"That's the ticket," he was saying approvingly. "How do you like it up there? We'll make a vaquero out of you one of these days."

Nita flushed with pleasure. She sat straight and held the reins tightly as the roan began to walk sedately round and round the corral.

"He is a most agreeable animal," she told herself with a rush of confidence, "and not in the least foolish or frisky. I like him—so far. I hope that he feels the same about me."

She leaned over to pat his russet mane, and dared to relax. El patron swung open the gate and the girls rode out single file on a trail that led through a thicket of toyon and elderberry to the open rolling hills of the horse pasture where Hermosa and a dozen or so companions were browsing under the oaks.

Beyond lay a field of sunburnt stubble where Tio and Juan and the twins were raking hay into yellow shocks.

The hay smelled dry and tickled Nita's nose. When she sneezed she frightened away a meadow lark that was tilting on the barbed wire fence and pouring out a song as sweet as stream water running over pebbles.

"Where are we going, *senorita*? Have you chosen a special place for our picnic?"

Lou turned in her saddle, half laughing, half serious, as she heard Nita's question.

"There you go again with that *senorita* business! Can't you remember that my name is just plain Lou?"

"But——"

"No more buts! That's what you always say."

"I will try to do better, sen—I mean Lou," Nita answered meekly.

Lou drew her brows together in a fierce frown, and then joined Nita in a giggle.

"But you have not told me about the picnic place. Is it near by?"

"Not much farther. It's a surprise, but I'll give you a hint. First of all, it is something you have never seen in your whole life. Number two hint—it is blue. As blue as my shirt, and there is lots and lots of it. Oodles!"

She burst out laughing at the blank look on Nita's face and then apologized. "That was mean of me. You couldn't possibly guess in a million years. Never mind, you'll find out in just a jiffy. Now close your eyes good and tight and don't open until I say ready. Never mind this steep part. Let Colorado have his head. Don't worry, he won't stumble."

Nita obeyed, but she did not care for this particular feature of the surprise. The trail dropped away steeply and as she clutched the pommel with a frightened grip she heard loose rocks clattering over the edge of what must surely be a dreadful precipice.

Down, down, and then suddenly the smell of salt

pricked her nostrils and a faint dampness blew against her cheeks.

"All right, you can look now. That's Seabird Beach down there."

Nita's eyes flew open wide. They grew rounder and rounder with delight and astonishment.

"Oh! Oh, Lou! I did not know el patron owned the ocean, too!"

Below her a narrow gorge split the hills and ran down to high bluffs. Under the bluffs there was a curve of white, glistening sand. Blue waves lapped it, scalloped with foam.

Buck and Colorado picked their way down a trail that grew steeper and more sandy with every step.

"We can tie up over there," Lou said at last, pointing to a small cove sheltered with scrubby, wind bent shrubs, "and then we can look for a nice spot to eat lunch. After that we can walk farther down the beach to those big rocks, and fish. I brought some tackle in my bag."

They slipped off their horses and Colorado added another point to his score of gentlemanly manners by standing still without a flick of an eyelash or twist of his head while Nita made a careful descent.

Pushing back her sombrero which seemed determined to keep slipping over her nose, she sighed with relief to feel firm ground, or rather sand, under her feet.

"There are certain places where I feel a soreness, a chafing," she confided to Lou. "Is that always part of horseback riding?"

Lou nodded. "Mostly, at first, until you get used to it." Then she added sympathetically, "If you don't feel like sitting down right this minute to eat lunch we can go wading instead, and hunt for shells."

She kicked off her riding boots as she spoke and Nita unlaced her brown shoes. Then they rolled their jeans above their knees and ran toward the water.

Timidly, Nita stuck first one toe in and then another, squealing at the cold tingle, and clapping her hands over her ears to shut out the roar of the white waves. Then when she grew bolder, she scooped up handfuls of foam, and laughing and shouting, she and Lou splashed one another until they were soaked.

Their jeans were wet to the thigh, their shirts plastered to their backs. Lou's bangs curled in the salty spray. Her fair skin reddened, her eyes squinted against the blue glare. Nita winced with the sting of sea water against her chafed spots, but she did not care. Even her braids dripped. One of the red ribbons that tied them floated away before she could snatch it back and sailed out to sea like a small gay boat.

Overhead white gulls screamed and swooped out of the summer sky, and scuttling, long-legged sandpipers left tracks like pen scratches on the shore line where the tide washed in and out.

As Nita watched the birds she thought about the pigeons she had fed so often by the plaza fountain, and for a moment she was lonesome for them, but it was hard to stay sad even for a second with her hands full of iridescent shells and with the strange wonderful sea so close, so blue.

"I love you, little pigeons, just as much as ever," she whispered inwardly, "and I will never forget you. It is just that Rancho Estrellas holds so many new things to make me glad. New things that are beautiful, and fun."

Lou ran out of the waves at last, shouting, "Come on. Let's try some fishing."

Nita followed her back to the horses and watched her pull two short stout sticks out of her saddle bag. They were wound with a heavy line from which several sharp hooks dangled.

"Now we'll have to walk around that sticking-out point down there to the rocks," Lou said as she handed Nita one of the lines. "We'll see some seals—hundreds of them. They bark just like dogs."

The girls tramped along the beach and rounded the point where smooth white sand gave way to jagged rocks and foam-lashed reefs.

"First of all, we need bait," Lou announced briskly. "I'll show you how to gather mussels. They cling to the rocks, you know, and you have to pull hard to get 'em off. Most likely I'll need my knife to pry 'em loose."

Scrambling over the wet brown rocks she plunged a hand along their sides, experimentally. "Here's one—and here's another," she exclaimed in triumph, holding up a small dripping gray shell. "Here goes. I'll see if I can smash them open." Picking up a small rock she hammered hard. "Ouch, my finger! My aim is not so good. That hurt."

After another try or two she finally handed Nita several pieces of bait. "Stick these on the hooks," she ordered, and then she and Nita settled themselves on a jutting-out reef where purple sea-anemones bloomed and green-shelled crabs goggled from every crevice.

"Drop in your line," Lou commanded again. "This is a good place for bullheads. Bill and I have caught them around here lots of times."

Nita obeyed, and watched the hooks sink into a deep pool that rose and ebbed with every breaking wave. She longed to catch a fish, but more than anything she wanted just to sit and watch the off-shore rocks where a herd of sea lions barked and sunned their old, battle-scarred bodies and sleek, diving youngsters sported in the blue water.

Ten minutes went by and then fifteen before either girl felt so much as a nibble at the end of her line, and then at last Lou pulled in an ugly fish with a thick head, bulging eyes, and a long bristling whisker on each side of its slit mouth.

"It will taste better than it looks," Lou assured Nita. "Wait till Mom fries that sweet white meat in butter. Hmmm——!"

It was another ten minutes before Nita got a bite and then after feverishly winding up her line she found nothing on the end but a disappointing tangle of kelp.

"Let's go farther out," Lou suggested. "There's no use sitting here all day. It's getting late and pretty soon the fog will come in. Come on, we'll go out to that big rock on the end of the point, see? Then as soon as you catch something we had better start home."

Standing up, she rewound her line, and making a sort of sling out of her shirt tails, stowed away her fish.

"Be careful you don't slip," she cautioned as she began to climb along the rocks. "Look where you are going. Don't just keep staring at those seals."

Nita did not need any further warning. She crept along after Lou, sometimes on all fours, sometimes standing, and tried not to think about the jagged rocks, the surging pools that boiled with foam.

Settled once more, the girls tried their luck again. Nita had scarcely rebaited her hooks and dropped them over when she felt a tremendous tug. Another. Another. The line pulled taut, and bracing herself for a mighty struggle, Nita hauled in with all her strength.

"You've got a beauty! A pip!" Lou shouted excitedly. "That isn't any old kelp. You've caught a whale this time."

Scrambling up, she straddled the two slippery rocks that separated her perch from Nita's. "Keep on pulling. I'll help you."

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when she teetered dangerously, lost her balance and lurched into a shoulder-deep pool that frothed wickedly under a ledge of the jutting reef.

"Nita!"

There was only time for one frantic scream before an incoming wave poured over her. Floundering, snatching at the rocks, she tried desperately to keep on her feet. Every fresh surge of water knocked her down again, gagging and blinding her.

Nita dropped her line. Throwing herself flat she leaned over the ledge and grabbed for Lou's shirt tails.

"Hang on! I've got you, Lou. Climb up quickly, quickly, before the next wave comes in!"

With her thin arms straining, Nita yanked at the shirt tails. The knot that held the bullhead in its sling pulled loose. The fish flopped out. Nita did not know or care whether it was alive or dead as a big wave washed it out of sight.

She had Lou partially over the edge of the reef now, and gritting her teeth, she gave a final breathless jerk. Lou gripped the rocks blindly, holding tight with bleeding fingers, and then as though she were swinging onto Buck's back, she put her last ounce of strength into a

weak heave. Gasping and choking she rolled over the ledge and lay still, face downward, her dripping hair slick against her white cheeks.

Nita crouched beside her, shaking as though she had a chill. After a minute or two Lou turned over and sat up. With a wretched moan, she was sick. Sea water poured out of her, together with her breakfast, and last night's supper. Then at last she turned to Nita with a faint wavering suggestion of a grin.

"Had enough fishing for today? So have I! Let's go."

Neither of them had anything to say as they crawled back to shore and onto the sand. When they reached the horses Lou made a face.

"Ugh—those sandwiches in my saddle bag! I bet I won't ever be hungry again as long as I live. Let's take off our jeans and get dry while there's still some sun, shall we?"

Nita agreed. Rather soberly, they undressed and spread out their clothes. Lou looked up vexedly after turning her pockets inside out. "Darn it, I lost my knife. It got washed away, I guess, just like my fish." Awkwardly, then, "It's lucky I didn't wash away, too. Thanks, Nita, you were wonderful!"

"Anybody could have done it," Nita answered. "All I did was hang on."

Thoughtfully, she added, "But the sea tricked me, Lou. Always I have thought the color blue to be soft—like

flowers, you understand, or Our Lady's robes, or the sky on a pretty day. Now I know better." With a shudder she turned her back to the ocean. "Blue can be most terrible. It can be too strong. There can be too much of it."

Chapter IV

WHEN their jeans had dried stiff from the salt water, the girls struggled into them and pulled on their boots and shoes. Lou gave Nita a boost into her saddle and Buck and Colorado headed again for the bluffs.

Leaving the last breath of sea air behind, they climbed into the hills and then Lou drew rein under a shady oak to show Nita the mahogany-red cattle that grazed ahead of them the other side of a barbed-wire fence.

* “Do you see the brand on their right hips? The S bar S? It stands for Sanchez Sherwood. Sanchez is Mom’s family name. Her people owned Rancho Estrellas way back in the beginning, and it has been passed along ever since. How do you like our spring calves? They are pure-bred Herefords, the best anywhere around.”

“Baby calves are nice, yes, but I do not care for los toros,” Nita answered uneasily, wishing that Lou would not ride so close to the fence. “Is it a certainty, Lou, that there are none near here?”



Clucking to Colorado with a henlike noise that he seemed to understand, she put a respectable distance between herself and the staring, curly-faced cattle.

Lou giggled. She was feeling better. Her cheeks were not as white as they had been, and she was beginning to wonder what her mother had packed in the saddle bags.

"You and your bulls!" she scoffed. "Why, I thought Mejicanos went around dressed like toreadors all the time. I thought you'd wear a red cape, and make an arena in your back yard so that you could chase Tomas around, instead of those pesky turkeys. You are an awful disappointment to me, Nita! Maybe, though, if you helped us rodeo some time, you would get used to cattle. Roundups are stacks of fun. We camp in the hills with just our blanket rolls and a frying pan and a coffee pot. We'll invite you, just as soon as you know a little bit more about riding, so that steep trails and things like that won't be so scary."

Nita tried to imagine what it would be like to sleep on a hillside with the stars for which the ranch was named, shining right on top of her.

The horses jogged along for about three miles and then Lou reined in again and waited for Nita to ride abreast.

"Would you like to see a secret place of mine?" she asked slowly, as though she had reached a decision after much thought. "A place that nobody but Bill and I

ever come to—nobody, I mean, but deer, and skunks and rabbits and 'coons? Nobody but coyotes and bobcats?"

Nita's eyes widened. "Oh yes, senor—I mean, Lou. Oh yes, more than anything!"

"And you'll keep still about it if I show you? You promise not to tell a single soul?" Lou's gray eyes searched Nita's eager face with solemn questioning.

"I promise."

"All right then, come on. Buck and I will lead the way."

The trail narrowed through tall redwoods, and dusty pungent ferns swished against their stirrups as they climbed. Buck and Colorado stopped at the top of a hill to rest a moment, their flanks sweating and heaving. Nita saw dark pine-crested mountains rising ahead, but directly below, the hill sloped into a little valley where oaks took the place of redwoods again, and willows and alders and aspens shaded a slow-running stream.

As the horses splashed through the water Nita bounced in her saddle with a pleased exclamation. "Look, Lou! Look at the olive trees over there by that wall. They are just like the ones that grow in Nueva." Stretching out a hand as they rode close, she picked a sprig of the narrow gray leaves and thrust it through her hat band. "Do you know who planted them? Surely they must have a great age, to be so gnarled, so humped over."

"You'll see something else that is old in just a second," Lou called back over her shoulder, and skirting the stretch of crumbling adobe wall, she led the way to the ruins of a tumbled-down roofless house.

Nita stared wonderingly at its sagging archways, at a pile of rotted timber and smashed bricks.

"This was the original ranch house," Lou told her. "My great-great-great-grandfather built it when he was granted Rancho Estrellas by the King of Spain. Over there, where the arches are, there used to be a little chapel so that the family could say their prayers, even if they were a long way from the nearest mission, the one at Monterey. The house was called La Casa de las Flores on account of all the wild flowers around here. The creek is Las Flores, too."

"But what happened to the house, Lou? What made it fall down?"

"Earthquakes. There were lots of them, and adobe cracks easily. After the last one, when the tiled roof caved in, Mom's people gave up trying to keep things patched together. They built the wooden house where we live now, instead."

Sliding off Buck, Lou led him to a tree.

"Let's tie up. Now I'll show you my secret place."

Walking around the rubble of the old house she led Nita along a weedy path paved with worn bricks. With a hard shove she opened a weathered door that sagged on rusty hinges.

“This was a patio,” she explained as they entered a deserted square of walled garden. “That old carved bench has been here for ages, and so has the fountain, and there is a Spanish soldier buried by the big oak. Do you want to see his grave?”

Nita followed her to a mound that was overgrown with sun-bleached grass and Lou pushed away a drift of old leaves as she stooped to read aloud the inscription on a sunken metal plate.

“Esteban Rodriguez Sanchez. 1758-1774.”

“Who was he, Lou?”

“A boy in Mom’s family, way back. He rode up here from Mexico carrying despatches from the governor to the comandante of Monterey presidio. He stayed at the ranch to visit a while and break his journey. He was riding a palomino, the same kind as Hermosa, you know, and it was one of the first golden horses in California. That’s how Mom’s family started to raise them and have all been crazy about them ever since—right up to now, this very minute.”

“Yes, but what happened to the boy? Why did he die?”

Nita was sorry for the soldier as she looked down at his grassy resting place. He had lived to be only a little older than the twins, or towheaded Bill.

“A bear clawed him. He had gone hunting in those rough mountains over by the coast. Remember where we saw the pine trees? Well, anyway, Mom’s family,

the great-great-greats, buried him here because he was so far from home and they knew that he liked Rancho Estrellas more than any other place he had ever seen——”

Lou broke off then, excitedly. “Why, golly, do you know something, Nita? I just thought of it! Of course, you aren’t any royal despatch bearer, and I certainly hope you never get clawed by wild animals, but just the same, aren’t you and the soldier a lot alike? I mean, aren’t you a stranger from Mexico, and don’t you like the ranch just the way he did? And isn’t there going to be another palomino around here pretty soon, even if you didn’t exactly bring it with you?”

Nita nodded. “Si, I understand what you mean,” she answered, greatly pleased at the idea. “It is like a wheel going round and round, with the same thing happening over again.”

“That’s right. My father says that’s the way it always is on a ranch. Nothing really changes. Animals and people die or go away, but new ones always come along to take their places, and the sun keeps shining and the rain falls and the grass grows just the same. Pa says Rancho Estrellas has always made room for whomever is happy on its hills.”

With a decided nod of her head she went on, “So you see, Nita, you fit in just perfectly. I knew it all the time! That’s why I wanted to bring you here. Now it is just as though you belonged to a sort of club with Bill

and me. An extra private one, because we're the only members. We come here lots of times and watch the creek through that broken place in the wall. We come just before dark, you know, and if we keep still as still, hardly breathing, we can see baby deer and their mothers and fathers coming down to drink. Kingfishers and ducks, too, flying in, and 'coons washing their little hands before they eat."

Hesitating then, and watching like a sharp-eyed hawk for the first hint that Nita might laugh at her, she added, "Yes, and there is a white coyote around here, too. He comes right in this patio some times. He's—he's sort of a ghost."

Nita's eyes popped. "*Madre mia*," she burst out, crossing herself hastily. "What kind of a rancho is this, will you please tell me? *Toros*, mountain lions, snakes, and now a ghost creature!"

"Well, perhaps he isn't really a ghost, but I don't know for sure. Lots of old-timers—Californios, you understand, say it is true. Anyway, he is white, Nita. When the moon shines on him he is just as white as beach sand."

"This is the truth, Lou? You have seen him yourself, with your own eyes?"

"Yes, once. At least, Bill and I were sitting over there by the wall when something moved in the shadows right beside the fountain. We turned too late to see anything but a sort of white flash. It might have been the

tip of his tail, or it might have been a bush moving. I don't know. Bill and I could never make up our minds. We've come lots of times since but nothing ever happens."

"But why do you say the coyote is a ghost?" Nita asked, looking around her uneasily, and glad of the bright sunshine.

"Because it is all part of a story, a legend, that belongs to the rancho. It is all written down in an old Spanish diary that Mom keeps locked up with the rest of the family things she has collected. Mantillas from the early days, for instance, and baby clothes, and letters, and the soldier boy's sword."

"Yes, yes, but tell me more about the coyote," Nita interrupted with an eager tug at Lou's arm. "Please, won't you?"

"Well, you see, he is supposed to be the spirit of an old Indian named Tolo who used to live in these hills. When my family first came here they made a sort of slave out of him. He helped build this house, and after it was finished he worked in the garden. One day he ran a thorn in his hand when he was weeding a rose bed near that old fountain over there, and though he was very afraid of white people, he knocked on the door and begged my great-great-grandmother to pull it out. She said yes, of course, but she had an awful time on account of the thorn sticking in so deep. She boiled herbs for poultices and nursed him the best she could,

but Tolo was sick a long while before all the poison came out and his hand healed.

“By that time the other Indians on the rancho decided to revolt.”

“Why?” Nita broke in again, her eyes enormous.

“Because they had a cruel overseer who whipped them all the time and made them work too hard. They got so angry they decided to kill all the Spaniards on the place, but old Tolo heard them plotting and when he ran to tell his master and mistress he was shot in the back by an arrow from his own people.

“My grandfather rushed out and dragged him into the house, and just before he died Tolo swore that he would never, never leave these hills. He would always stay to guard the rancho. That would be his way of thanking my family for their kindness to a poor old slave.”

Lou stopped to take a breath after so many words, but Nita prodded her on, impatiently.

“How do you know that Tolo changed himself into a white coyote?” she demanded. “How can you prove it?”

“I can’t, Nita—of course not. Don’t be silly! Didn’t I tell you it is just a legend? Just a sort of make-believe?”

With a shrug, as though after all, Nita might as well hear the whole story, she went on, “All the same, whether he is a real ghost or just an albino—because sometimes there are white pups in coyote litters—he is

supposed to prowl around this patio whenever any danger threatens the rancho.”

“Can only the people in your own family see him?”

“No. The story in the diary ends up by saying, ‘and ever after Tolo will return to all those whose hearts belong to Rancho Estrellas, whose hands serve it, and whose courage shall guard it.’ Bill and I learned that by heart a long time ago when Mom and Pa first told us the story.”

Nita’s eyes were bigger than ever now. “But what happened that time when you and Bill saw him?” she gasped. “What danger was this ghost of Tolo trying to warn you about?”

Lou looked a trifle taken back for a moment as though she wished that people who listened to legends would not be so particular when it came to pinning down facts. Nita really ought to let the matter rest without so many awkward questions.

Then her gray eyes danced with mischief. “The measles,” she exploded with a giggle, “the measles, that’s what he tried to warn us about. Bill and I caught them the very next day. We passed them on to Mom and Pa, and then pretty nearly all of the men at the bunk house got them. You should have seen everybody breaking out with bright red spots. It was awful! But Nita, don’t sit there looking so serious. You make me laugh the way you’re staring around this patio. Why don’t you forget about spooks for a while?”

Quickly then, so that Nita's feelings would not be hurt, "Never mind. Keep on staring all you like. I was just joking. It's just that I hope you'll like it here." Soberly, she confided, "This is my favorite place on the whole rancho. I've never showed it to any other girl but you. Would—would you want to be best friends with me, Nita? I'd like it lots."

There was more in Lou's eyes than she could put into words. She wanted to say, 'Please be my friend even though you are a foreigner. Please do, even though you think that cows belong in a bath house. Even though you have only one dress, and only the roof that strangers have offered you.'

Nita could only stare, doubting her ears. Could she truly have heard that most beautiful word *amigo*?

"Will you, Nita?" Lou repeated insistently. "Will you be best friends?"

Nita nodded, speechless for a moment. To do the occasion justice she longed to express herself in the best possible manner. With a burst of inspiration she remembered Roberto's and Salvador's proud grasp of the English language.

"O.K.," she answered, her face glowing. "You betcha, Lou!"

Chapter V

AFTER their ride to Casa de las Flores, Nita and Lou sealed their bonds of friendship with daily meetings. Sometimes it was Lou who ran down the path to the little cottage under the grape vines shouting, "Hi, Neets! Let's do something, what do you say?" Or sometimes it was Nita knocking at the Sherwoods' kitchen door with a shy, "If you please, senora, is it permitted that I play with Lou?"

One hot morning they saddled Colorado and Buck and rode over the hills to the Upper Field with lunch for the hay-baling crew.

El patron and Bill and Tio Felipe and Juan and the twins had been hard at work since dawn. Shock after yellow rustling shock had been pitchforked into the press. Bale after bale had dropped out ready to be hauled to the barn. Now, sweating under a blazing sun, parched and choked by swirling chaff, the workers were more than ready to stop for their noon-hour rest, but even the noisy chug-chug of the press could not drown out the song that the girls heard as they rode close.

Stripped to their waists, their brown bodies glisten-

ing, their enormous straw sombreros slanted rakishly on their black heads, the Mejicanos were warbling at the top of their voices.

Like castanets, their song spoke of dancing and fiestas, and Lou laughed, and snapped her fingers, and swayed in the saddle, keeping time, but Nita, with an alarmed "Whoa! Whoa!" pulled Colorado in tightly and hoped with all her heart that he would not be tempted to kick up his heels in a gay fandango.

Americano peek-neeks were most pleasant, she decided, as she and Lou tied their horses under an oak tree and spread out the good lunch that Mrs. Sherwood had packed in the saddle bags. Most pleasant indeed, even though the hay balers were too hungry and weary to be the best of company. All they wanted was to lie sprawled in the shade, wolfing their lunch and washing it down with the canteens of lemonade for the boys, the cold bottles of beer for el patron and Tio and Juan that the senora had so thoughtfully provided.

Yes, everything would be of a perfection, she told herself, if only el patron's gray eyes did not look so tired, so sober, even when he smiled. She stared anxiously at Lou's father as he lay stretched out snoozing with his hat over his face, smoke drifting from his pipe. His appetite was not what it should have been, she had noticed. He had passed his second meat sandwich to Tio. He had tossed his hard-boiled egg to Bill with a brief, "Catch it, kid."

When he sat up at last with a glance at the watch in his jeans' pocket, and then started his crew back to the press, Nita gave a troubled sigh.

"What's the matter, Neets? Too full? Too hot?"

Lou asked the question lazily. She was lying on her back, her freckled face flushed, her bangs curling moistly in the heat.

"What's up?" she inquired again, mildly curious, as she chewed a straw and tossed acorns at the blue jays that chattered in the tree overhead.

"Nothing." The sigh came again. "I was only thinking about Hermosa. About her colt."

Lou gave a resigned grunt. "Oh, that again? Seems to me you have Hermosa on your mind more than any of us. Bill says you're down at the corral pretty nearly every morning when he feeds her just waiting for a chance to pat her. What's the use of worrying about her, Neets? Christmas is a long way off—and anyway, we can't do a thing about it. We'll just have to take whatever kind of a foal she gives us whether we like it or not, won't we?"

"Si—but the worry comes just the same, whether it helps or not."

Lou sat up then, and her eyes went to the hills that bordered the hay field. Tawny as a bobcat's pelt under the summer sun, they stood stripped of hay, so closely caten down that bare ground showed through in ugly dark patches.

"Worry, worry, that's all I do," she confessed un-

happily, "no matter how hard I pretend not to. Did you hear about Pa having to sell his spring calves? He is pretty sick about it, too, I can tell you, after raising such fine stock."

"Did el patron have to sell the calves because there is not enough grass to go around?"

"Yes. And he won't get half as much money for them now as he would if he could have kept them to sell later when they'd be fat, and lots bigger. See—it's like this——"

Nita listened, all attention, so that she would not miss a single point of the cattle business, and Lou finished her explanations with a gallant attempt to look on the bright side of things. "Well, anyway, selling the calves is lots better'n watching 'em starve. Pa would rather sell the whole outfit, any day, than own a bunch of stock with nothing to them but bones and bellow. It's awful, Neets, just terrible, to hear them hollering and hollering all day and night on account of being hungry. You get so you can't sleep a wink. All you do is twist and toss in bed, and pretty soon you feel your own stomach shrinking. Honest you do."

With a nod toward the hay press she added, "It's not hard work that makes Pa so tired and quiet. It's all the figuring and figuring, trying to see a way out."

Nita was silent a moment, her eyes thoughtful.

"I wonder if Hermosa knows how much depends on

her?" she asked at last. "She is so kind a mare, so good a one, surely her heart would break to disappoint you about a golden colt. Poor Beautiful One, think what a sadness she would feel."

"Yes, and it will be goodbye to her, too, don't forget, if we lose out on that baby palomino. If her colt doesn't bring the luck we're counting on, if next winter isn't any better than last, Pa will sell her sure as anything. He'll need money, Nita, and Hermosa is worth piles and piles. Just yesterday there was a letter from a Wild West Show that wants to buy her. You don't find horses like her every day, believe me. Not all gold, and silver, with four matched white stockings, and manners like—well, like a princess. No siree, I should say not. They come one in a million."

Nita gave a small shiver. "Once there was a carnival in Nueva. I looked through a hole in the tent and watched a man teaching the horses tricks. There were whip marks on their backs, Lou, long, raw ones. When it was performance time the trainer dressed them up in red and green blankets. Satin ones, with fringe all made of beads. The whip marks did not show, and while the band played music, they trotted around and around, and jumped through big burning hoops."

Lou stuck her fingers in her ears. "Ugh—that's enough. Just think if Hermosa had to do things like that." For a moment her face looked almost as ill as it

had when she swallowed half the ocean at Seabird Point, and then, abruptly, she jumped up and brushed twigs and a red ant from her jeans.

"It's just as I said before. We can't do a single thing about it, so there's no use our sitting around here like a couple of chickens with the pip. That won't help a bit. Let's have some more lemonade and then ride home. This darn old field is too hot. I'm roasted."

The girls started toward their horses and then as they turned to wave goodbye to the hay balers, a sudden shout stopped them short.

"My hat. My so excellent hat. Ahhhh—*Dios mio, Dios mio!*"

Salvador, pitchfork in hand, was staring in horror after his sombrero. A stray breeze had sailed it off his head. Before he could snatch at its rawhide string it skimmed blithely into the mouth of the press and disappeared from sight.

Chug-chug. Chug-chug. Heartlessly, the press kept on gulping, grinding.

A neatly compressed and wired bale dropped to the ground.

Sticking out around its edge was something that might have been a bit of mangled brim, or, perhaps, the remains of a high-peaked crown.

Everyone roared with laughter. Roberto and Juan rolled on the ground. Bill gave a delighted, shrill whistle, and Tio began to prance around, rubbing his

stomach as he pretended to munch at the bale. "Delicious! Delicious, I tell you. A most unusual flavor! Am I not a fortunate cow to have such a feast set before me? Help yourself, Senorita Lou! Have a bite! Help yourself, Nita my little one. There is plenty for all of us."

El patron laughed, too. "Never mind, Salvador. Tomorrow I will give you a day off. You can go to town and buy a brand new hat to make up for this calamity. Think of it—a fine felt, if you like, with a ribbon band, perhaps, or even a little feather sticking up in the latest style."

Salvador did not need consoling, however, after that first stunned moment. His eyes sparkled, shining and black as ripe olives. What a fine chance he had given everyone for a laugh. What a splendid joke he had been privileged to make.

"Ha ha!" he crowed, his teeth flashing. "That was funny all right, all right, was it not, senor? Good and funny! The best yet! Did you see it, all you people? Did you hear the manner in which my so beautiful sombrero went crunch, crunch?"

Then with a mock bow to el patron, he asked, "You will excuse me from my labors one small minute, senor? I wish to say goodbye and godspeed to my faithful companion who has stood by me for so many years. My old friend from Nueva who now leaves me alone and sad in a strange land."

Patting the bale mournfully, he said his farewell.

“Adios, *amigo mio*, adios! How sorry I am for you, now, ground up to small bits like a meat ball!”

Lou and Nita were still giggling when the hay balers went back to work again.

“Crazy old Salvador. Wasn’t he a good sport? I couldn’t have joked that way if it had been my best hat getting chewed-up,” Lou declared admiringly as they jogged toward the corral. “But then, it seems to me you Mejicanos are always having fun. When we sit on the porch after supper we hear you laughing all the time. Or if you run out of jokes, then your uncle plays his guitar and your aunt sings to the baby, with the rest of you joining in like a regular chorus.”

“But laughter is very nice, and so is music. Do not Americanos find it so?”

Nita asked the question with honest surprise, and then, gravely, with only a suspicion of a smile tugging at her lips, “You would like to hear perhaps how Tio Felipe once mended a broken-off toe by just a little bit of singing, a little guitar playing?”

“What on earth——” Lou turned in her saddle to stare.

“It was like this—a burro stepped on his foot. Off came the big toe, right in Tio’s hand. Quickly, quickly, he hobbled home and tied it back on with a good strong string. Then, because he knew that a little fiesta would be the best thing to take the hurt away and make him

feel better, he sent Tia Lupe running to bring all the neighbors. When the party started he made up a fine new song on his guitar, calling the burro forty-three different names. Forty-three, mind you, Lou. If you had heard him. Oh, it was most funny."

Nita clapped a hand over her mouth and rocked with delight at this part of her story. "Such a good time as we had that night. Of a superbness, let me tell you. Everyone stayed for supper, and then the next morning when Tio woke up—a little late, you understand—his foot did not pain him in the least. You could not even see where the toe had mended. No, not a single mark showed!"

"Oh yeh? You expect me to believe a whopper like that?"

Lou's eyebrows shot up sceptically, but Nita only laughed again. She was remembering the fun in the little turquoise house. Tia Lupe's larder had not held nearly enough frijoles or tortillas. It had been necessary for the neighbors to slip out and return with wine and stew from their own kitchens, but nevertheless the evening had been a glorious success.

As she thought about home, and familiar faces, her eyes clouded. Now was as good a time as any, she supposed, to bring up a matter that had been on her mind for weeks.

"My cousin, Inez Lompo, wishes to pay the rancho

a visit," she told Lou reluctantly. "You will permit me to invite her? It is something that I cannot help. Whenever I see her she asks and asks."

"Inez? Oh, you mean that girl who came up from Nueva with her family the same time you did? The one whose father does the leather work and the silversmithing at the saddle shop in town?"

"Si."

"Well of course you can ask her out any time you want—but what's wrong with her? You don't look very pleased about having her around. Don't you like her?"

"Like her? You think that anyone could like such a stupid mean person?"

Nita's eyes flashed indignantly, but she bit her lips hard to hold back the confidences she longed to pour into Lou's interested, sympathetic ears. She was ashamed to tell all she knew about Inez.

Oh, oh, that dreadful pretended limp of hers! That whining voice, that humped-over, crooked back, all for the benefit of the tourists who sat eating their sherbet and drinking coffee at the little sidewalk tables set around the plaza.

"Pesos, senors! Pesos, senoras! Just a few pesos if you please so I may eat."

No, those shameless begging tricks were too disgraceful to repeat. Blots on the family honor! It would be enough to tell Lou about Inez' love of teasing.

About the time she threw a stone at one of the white gentle pigeons, and broke its wing. About the time she knocked over Nita's flower basket and then laughed at the snapped stems, the bruised buds, that no one would buy.

Lou listened to the whole tale, and then she grinned.

"Bring her out. Let me see what she's like, close to. One more skunk on the ranch won't matter! Golly, but you have a red face, Nita. Does just thinking about her make you so boiling mad? What happens when you get together? I bet you blow up like a balloon."

Later, when supper was over, Nita stood by her window braiding her hair. While she snapped an elastic around the end of each long thick rope, she looked down toward the corral.

What would happen to Hermosa if the circus man took her away from Rancho Estrellas? She would whinny and whinny, putting up her head anxiously, blowing through her pink nostrils. No one whom she loved would answer. She would search uselessly out of dark, straining eyes.

She would never again run free in the wind, her mane and tail streaming like broad silver ribbons. Shut under a smothering tent she would long in vain for starry nights, for the moonlight that striped hills and canyons with the black shadows of oak trees and redwoods and shrubby toyon.

Comfortingly, Nita sent a whisper through the darkness.

"*Buenas noches*, Beautiful One. Do not be afraid. Remember that every night I make a wish for you on the first star. Go to sleep then, and have a good dream."

After that she turned toward the Sherwood's house.

"Good-night to you, too, *el patron*," she whispered again. "When Christmas comes, all will be well, you will see."

She was certain of it as she stood there with the warm summer night so close around her, the chirp of crickets and the river's murmur in her ears. Certain that *el patron* would waken some morning to a steady downpour on the roof, to soaked fields and to hills where hard brown seeds were cracking open with a promise of tall grass.

Most surely, Rancho Estrellas would have rain. A newborn colt snuggling next to *Hermosa* like a little good-luck charm was going to bring it.

Perhaps, though, her wishes on the evening star might go astray. A small prayer to San Benito would be on the safe side. Everyone knew he had a soft place in his heart for *rancheros*.

Chapter VI

“WHOO-HOO, whoo-hoo, Ni—ta. Whooo-hooo.” When she heard her name shouted through the drowsy afternoon hush, Nita scrambled out of the creek and reluctantly pulled on her shoes and socks. A pity to leave the flash of blue dragonflies, the white cranes on their red stilts, the basking turtles, the whisper of green leaves and the water’s quick chatter. She was never lonely at the river. She did not need people around for company. Most certainly she did not want someone like Inez who was shouting now from the cottage at the top of her lungs.

Whether she liked it or not, Nita knew that she would have to play hostess. Inez had not wasted any time in accepting her distinctly cold invitation to visit Rancho Estrellas, and evidently Cousin Gordo Lompo had been glad of an excuse to leave the saddle shop and take his daughter for a spin in the country. That was because he had bought a new car. An almost new one, at least. He had touched up its worn places with bright green paint, and induced its engine to hum merrily, and he was extremely proud of his *catarina*—his little singing bug, as he called it.

"Where have you been?" Inez demanded, her big eyes as bright and curious as a magpie's, when Nita reached the cottage. "Did you have to take all day? Now show me everything. Show me over the whole place, do you hear? Not that I see anything so wonderful about a rancho. I'll take town, any day. Who wouldn't? I am glad Papa is smart, so he can have a better job than Tio. What do you do all the time? Just poke around with the cows and the horses and the chickens? Not for me. Do you know something, Nita? There is a cinema in town—a movie show. I go every Saturday, and nights, too, lots of times."

With a frank stare, she took in every detail of Nita's patched jeans and the faded blue shirt that hung a little loosely around her thin shoulders.

"Are those left-overs from the Americana?" she asked bluntly. "Does she hand you out old clothes?"

Ignoring the scarlet tide creeping over Nita's face, she gave a complacent tug to her pink rayon skirt, and a pat to her hair that was pushed up into a top-heavy pompadour in front, and left to fly in a frizzy tangle behind. "You ought to see the shops in town! Just look what I bought yesterday." She jingled a dozen brassy looking charms that hung around her wrist. "From the dime store," she announced proudly, and then with a glance at Nita's brown arms, "Saints in Heaven! Do you still wear that old junk from Nueva? Why don't you get something pretty and new like mine?"

Nita fingered the hammered silver bracelet that Tio had made for her one Christmas. He had swept out the scraps from Cousin Gordo's workshop and melted them down until there was enough for the bracelet and for a pair of earrings that Tia Lupe cherished for Sunday church going.

"I do not want to forget about Nueva," she said slowly. "I like it here—I like it a great deal, Inez. But I do not want everything new and different."

"I do!"

Inez flaunted her pink skirts again. "Everything I am wearing is new from the skin out. Papa says to spend all the money we want! There is lots of it in *los Estados Unidos*, he says, so why not?"

Nita could not resist a small dig. "Did you pay for the new things?" she asked. "Or did you hump your back, and put out your hand to beg?"

Inez looked startled for a moment as though a small meek dove had made up its mind to a sharp peck. Then she laughed and tossed her head. "You haven't changed a bit, Nita Valdez. Your neck is just as stiff as ever. Come on. Let's not stand here twiddling our thumbs. Show me the rancho, I tell you. Every bit."

After she had inspected Julita and Tomas, the turkeys and the chickens, she demanded something more exciting. She was bored with the Cockerel. She did not want to waste so much as five minutes playing with him. She did not think it fun to watch him cool off his little

fat brown body in Tia's dish pan that served so well for a swimming pool.

When she saw the barns and corrals she was disappointed that los toros were kept in a field far away from the house, and that there was little or no chance of seeing anyone gored.

Nita led her patiently from place to place. On the way to the corrals Inez produced a bag of candy out of the white patent leather purse she carried stylishly, and tossing red paper wrappers as she strolled along, she sucked noisily on round hard balls that colored her tongue black and smelled of anise seed.

As the girls climbed over the fence several of the candy wrappers fluttered into the water trough that stood near the rails. Nita grabbed for them, but they were waterlogged and had sunk to the bottom before she could fish them out.

"Do not throw in any more," she cautioned Inez. "Be most careful, if you please. Everyone tries to keep the troughs clean. Horses get sick from drinking dirty water."

Inez shrugged. She calmly let a few more papers drop out of her hand. "As if little scraps like that could hurt anything! Tell me, where is the blacksmith shop you were talking about? Over there, where all the racket is going on? Now, that is truly something."

She found it exciting to watch the sparks fly from a red-hot forge. The din of the anvils pleased her, and

the kicking and struggling and squeals of a little pinto colt that was being shod for the first time in its life, but in a few minutes the novelty wore off and she turned away.

"What is there to do now?" she wanted to know. "Can we go up to that big house under the trees? Is that where the Americana girl lives? Do you ever see her, or is her head too high in the air for her to come out and play with her mother's servant?"

Nita grew hot with shame. Angry tears stung her eyes. Always, always, Inez spoiled everything. Now she had made an ugliness out of the happy evenings in the big, clean rancho kitchen when she and Tia Lupe had washed the supper dishes while the senora and Lou cut fruit and sorted berries and boiled sugar for dozens of jars of jams and jellies and pickles.

Inez liked to twist things the wrong way. She did not know about el patron standing in the kitchen doorway smoking his pipe and watching the lamp light shine on the senora's pretty fair hair, or smiling down into her eyes that were as blue as her big apron.

Inez did not know about Bill, getting in everyone's way, and making them all laugh by pretending to be a puppy up on its hind legs, barking, as he begged for tastes of all the preserves, and blowing on hot spoonfuls until they were cool enough to sample.

When the kitchen was tidy again, the evening milk set in the screened cooler, the breakfast rolls left to rise

in a yellow bowl, Tio Felipe would knock at the back door with the Cockerel asleep in his arms. Perhaps, for a few minutes, he and el patron would discuss the day's happenings, and then Tio would escort his ladies home to the little house under the grapes.

"We like to help el patron and his family," she told Inez, her voice trembling a little as she tried to explain. "Working for them does not keep us from being friends. Lou says that speaking the same language is what counts. Oh, I do not mean *espanol* or *inglés*—no, I mean liking the same things, laughing at the same jokes—"

She broke off abruptly. What use to waste breath? Inez could never understand. And any way, there was Lou coming out of her door this very minute.

"Hello Neets," she shouted, running toward them with Bugle at her heels. "Is this your cousin? I thought so. I saw the car stop at your house. Come on in. Let's sit on the porch. Mom has cake and lemonade for us."

She stopped to pick a cluster of waxy sweet buds from one of the tall, glossy-leaved trees that stood on either side of the gate, and took a deep sniff. "Hmmm—good, aren't they? We couldn't get along out here without our lemons. I'm glad the frost didn't get them this year."

"In town, we buy pop," Inez announced impressively. "It comes in a tall green bottle. It costs five cents, any flavor."

Lou looked a trifle surprised. Evidently she had always taken soda pop for granted, but she managed a polite "Yes, I know," as she led the way across a bricked patio to the side porch.

Inez seemed to enjoy the lemonade even if it came out of a tame white china pitcher instead of a sparkling drugstore bottle. She drank three glasses of it, and ate two pieces of cake, and was so jolly, such good company, that Nita watched her in amazement. No doubt about it, she had made up her mind to be on her best behavior. Perhaps she wanted to make a good impression on the Americana. Perhaps even such a one as Inez had rare moments when she could be just everyday, plain nice.

The afternoon promised to be most agreeable. Mrs. Sherwood came out and suggested that the girls make a jigsaw puzzle until the heat was over, and then, she asked, would they like to go down to the sty and look at the new litter of pigs that had just arrived? Of course, they were not to venture inside. They must stay on the fence. Mother pigs were bad-tempered creatures. They did not like interference.

The jigsaw went fairly well for a while. They had reached a point where the most important piece of all, the tip of a man's long nose, was needed to complete a whole section, when Inez jumped up with an impatient wriggle.

"I am tired of just sitting still," she announced, as

bits of puzzle jiggled off the table and broke up on the floor. "We will never in the world find that old nose. Who cares, anyway? Cannot we make a visit to the pigs?"

With a sigh, Nita stole a glance at Lou. Lou's eyebrows rose comically. She leaned over and picked up the fallen pieces and tried to reset them. "Just a minute," she said. "Bill, my brother, you know, worked a whole hour on this last night. Wait till I get the man's beard put together again, do you mind?"

Inez drummed on the table impatiently. She took a little mirror out of her purse and glanced at her hair. Then she pulled out a red comb and ran it through the frizz until it stuck out in a bushier manner than ever. She retied the pink bow that rode on top, and settled a small gilt barette. Then she thrust out her legs and admired her near-silk stockings. They had come from the Palace Emporium in town, together with her white strapped slippers that were thick with corral dust now.

"Let's go," she kept saying impatiently. "Let's go." Wriggling again, she rustled her bag of candy, offered it all around, and tossed another wrapper on the floor.

Lou shoved back her chair in desperation. "Come on then. Never mind those other pieces, Nita, we will have to put them in later."

When they reached the pig pen back of the barn Nita knew that she had never in all her life seen any-

thing as ugly as the giant sow that lay at the far end of the sty while her litter suckled and squealed around her.

"She is most horrid, Lou. I do not like her one bit! Look at her eyes. They are like the little red sparks from the forge."

"Yes, and she's good and mean, too, not just ugly."

"Why is it that she sticks out her snout like that? She wishes to bite something with those teeth of hers?"

"Yep. She's been rooting around and found a corn-cob or something, I guess. I'd hate to have her start chawing on me. She looks fierce enough to tackle anything, doesn't she?"

"I am not afraid of her," Inez broke in boastfully "I wish I could pick up one of her babies. I have never seen small pigs before. Why, surely, two of them would fit in my hand, easily."

"Maybe, but no one is going to go in there and prove it," Lou answered coolly. "If you like baby animals so much you ought to come out some time when we have new calves. Ducks and chickens are darling, too, right out of their shells."

"If she comes at Christmas time she will see a baby colt, won't she?" Nita put in with a quick secret smile for Lou. Then turning to Inez she said gravely, "Did you know that there is soon to be a golden horse on Rancho Estrellas?"

Inez stared. She was half way up the fence, her white shoes hooked on the rails. "A golden horse? I do not believe such a thing."

She looked toward Lou, but Lou only nodded, her face solemn.

"It's true as true. It's going to be solid gold. Oh, except for its mane and tail of course. They'll be solid silver."

Inez' glance wavered uncertainly between the two girls and then she tossed her head. "You are both crazy in the head," she stated flatly. Climbing a little higher she swung a leg over the top of the fence. "Watch me! I am going to pick up one of those little pigs no matter what anyone says. I will make it eat hay right out of my hand. You'll see. That fat old sow cannot scare me one little bit. Here goes!"

With a quick jump she was over the top rail and had dropped inside the sty. Lou made a useless grab for her pink skirt.

"Come back, Inez. Don't be so silly. Baby pigs can't eat hay—they only drink milk. Please, please come back! You heard what my mother said."

Inez did not pay the slightest attention. She ran across to the shed where the sow lay stretched in a cool puddle of muddy water made by the drip from its trough. With a triumphant grin, she leaned over and made a hasty snatch at the piglets, but before she could pick one up, the sow stirred and grunted.

Nita, hanging tightly to the fence, her eyes aghast, screamed. Lou gave a horrified shout.

"Look out! Run, Inez, run!"

The sow was on her feet now, wallowing out of the mud like a hippopotamus. Bulky, but not slow, she turned on Inez with another furious grunt, her little red eyes glinting.

"Run! Run!"

Inez did not need Lou's and Nita's imploring shrieks to hurry her. She was already on her way back to the fence as fast as she could fly. Mud splashed all around her. Half way across the sty she slipped on a pile of garbage and went down on all fours.

Nita shut her eyes.

Lou screamed again, frantically. "Pa! Mom—somebody come quick! Hurry! Hurry!"

With the grunting enraged sow lumbering closer, closer, her hideous snout quivering, her tusks gleaming, Inez scrambled to her feet. In a barnyard pandemonium of pigs' squealing, chickens' squawking, and Bugle's barking as he rushed to Lou's side, Inez made a last panting dash, grabbed the fence and tumbled over the top to safety.

Slobbering and snuffing, the sow rooted excitedly between the rails, and stamped the ground with her hard hoofs. Then, cheated and still raging, she went back to her litter.

Lou put a hand on Inez' shoulder. "We'd better go

up to the house. My mother will help you wash that mud and garbage off your dress, and I've got some white cleaner for my Sunday shoes. We can fix yours just as good as new."

Inez pulled away. She was sallow under her brown skin, and she was breathing hard, scarcely able to keep from crying.

"Leave me alone," she muttered sullenly. "I do not need any fixing. Do you think I wish to listen to your mother's scoldings? It is not the least bit her business. Come, Nita, let's you and I get away from this nasty sty. I hate pigs! Let's go over to your house—that is the only decent place around this rancho."

Lou's freckled face was crimson. Her eyes snapped dangerously. "That's O.K. with me. I was just trying to help you."

Nita snuggled a small hand into Lou's and gave it a quick, sympathetic squeeze. "Do not pay any attention," she whispered imploringly. "Do not have a fight, Lou. She is not worth it. I told you what she is—the very most rude mean girl in all of Mejico."

Silently they turned their backs on the pig sty. As they walked through the corral they saw Bill. With Hermosa beside him on a halter, he was staring into the water trough, a puzzled frown screwing up his forehead.

"Who threw those papers in the water?" he demanded as the girls came in sight. "Was it one of you

kids? Who ever did it ought to be thrown off the ranch, that's all I've got to say."

"Oh!"

With an unhappy gasp, Nita looked in the trough. The red dye had soaked out of Inez' candy wrappers. The water was bright pink. Soda pop pink.

"A heck of a thing it would have been if Hermosa had taken a drink before I came along," Bill went on angrily. "If I knew who was to blame I'd hand 'em a scrub brush and make 'em scour the whole doggone trough. They'd scrub plenty hard, too, believe me!"

He glared accusingly at the three girls. Lou's chin went in the air. "You needn't look at me like that, Bill Sherwood," she flared. "It's not my fault——"

She broke off with a vexed exclamation as a voice floated from the Sherwood's porch.

"Lou! Lou! Time to come in, dear."

"Golly fish hooks! Wouldn't you know Mom would call me just at a time like this? I'll have to go. I promised I'd shell peas for supper."

With an uneasy glance at Nita as much as to say, "I hate to leave you in this pickle," she started to the gate.

"Goodbye," she said stiffly to Inez, not bothering with a 'come again sometime.'

"Goodbye." Equally stiff, Inez left out a 'thank you for the nice time.'

Bill's eyes, as gray as el patron's, bored into the two

girls who were left by the trough. There was a miserable silence. Nita squirmed, her face painfully red. Inez stared at him out of sulky defiant eyes.

"Guess you didn't know any better," Bill growled, a little ashamed of his anger when he saw the humiliated tears that were ready to splash down Nita's cheeks. "Couldn't expect a——" He had started to say "couldn't expect a couple of dumb foreigners to have any sense" but he checked himself in time.

"Beat it, you kids," he finished up with a jerk of his tow head. "I'll do the swabbing out this once, but if I ever catch anyone messing up a trough again——"

Nita and Inez fled. When they reached the cottage Inez stopped under the grape arbor to catch her breath and to rummage in the white purse she had clutched all afternoon, even when the sow was after her. Pulling out the mirror and comb she fluffed her hair, and then without a word to Nita, flounced into the house.

When Tio Felipe and the twins came in for supper she was her old bold self again. The stains on her skirt did not bother her in the least. She made them an excuse to laugh loudly over her adventure with the pigs.

"You should have been there," she told Salvador and Roberto. "You should have seen me climb the fence! It was exciting. Almost as good as a bull fight! But oh, weren't Nita and the Americana frightened? That was funny! You ought to have heard them yell when the mama pig came after me."

With a toss of her hair, a pat of her pink bow and a jingle of her bracelets she added lightly, "Some people are terrible babies, is it not true? As for me, I just laughed at that old sow. The only reason I ran was to give her some exercise. She needed it, fat, ugly thing!"

It was ten o'clock before Cousin Gordo steered his little green bug toward home. Nita had begun to think the evening would never end. With a heavy heart she felt that Inez had broken something that could not possibly be mended.

Lou would not want to be best friends any more. She would not want to have anything to do with a girl who was careless enough to poison a water trough. Oh, that terrible pink water! What if Hermosa had drunk it?

But how could she explain to Lou that it was not her fault? She could not tattle on someone who had been her guest—a relative, a member of the family, dreadful as it was to admit.

As for Bill and his opinion of her—no, one could not bear to think of the matter.

With a miserable sigh, she said good-night to Tia, and to Tio Felipe who was sitting outside on the doorstep puffing a cigarrillo and enjoying the stars.

Catching hold of her hand, he pulled her down beside him.

"Something troubles you, *querida*?" he asked. "Something you could tell old Tio?"

Then when she could not answer because of the hard

lump in her throat, he jerked her braids. "Tell me," he insisted gently. Then with a burst of sobs that had been ready to come for hours, Nita put her head on his shoulder and poured out her woe.

"I cannot tell Lou who did it," she kept saying over and over between hiccoughs and gulps, "I cannot tell her, Tio, that is the worst part."

"No, you must not be a tale-bearer," Tio agreed soberly. "You never have been, Nita *mia*, not all the years that Roberto and Salvador have plagued you with their mischief and their teasing. You do not wish to start such a thing now, that is certain. But tell me—you say that you and the little *senorita* are what you call best friends? Is that the way of it?"

"Si, Tio," Nita sobbed with a fresh burst of tears. "She chose me and I chose her."

"Well then, here is a lesson you must learn."

Tio's black eyes were kind and wise in their mesh of wrinkles as he twisted his moustachio thoughtfully, and hunted for words that Nita would understand. "You must trust the *senorita*, my sad little one. Remember that friendship is like a braided rawhide *riata*—strong, and twisted of many thongs. It is not easily snapped. The edges do not fray at every rough jerk. Trust your *amigacita*, I tell you, and wait until tomorrow to see how things turn out."

Pulling his bandanna from his shirt pocket he mopped Nita's face. "Come now, a big blow of your

nose—that is better—and off to bed with you. Night time makes trouble doubly black, *querida*, take my word for it. When the sun shines again everything will look brighter.”

“I—I hope so,” Nita quavered as she trumpeted into the red bandanna. “I hope it very much, Tio.”

When she was ready for bed she blew out her candle and lay with her head turned on the pillow so that she could see the Sherwoods’ house through the window, dim and shadowy.

Was Tio right, she wondered, only a little comforted? If not, and if a certain person wanted to stop being best friends, how, oh, how, would she go about announcing it?

Chapter VII

TIO FELIPE was the first one up in the Valdez household the next morning. When he came in the back door after milking Julita there was a wide smile on his brown face. He was carrying a basket of raspberries so fresh from the garden that dew beaded their leaves, and there was a note on top addressed to Nita.

“What did I tell you, little one—trust is a good thing between friends, yes?”

Nita dropped the frying pan she was setting on the stove, and snatched the note with eager impatient fingers.

Dear Neets—

Don't worry about that trough business. Bill and I know who did it. Meet us at the corral at noon. We are going to work cattle. Tell your aunt we wont be home till after supper.

Yours very truly,
Lou

P.S. I hope the sow catches up with you-know-who the next time she thinks she's so smart.

L.S.

There was a shining look on Nita's face as she turned to Tia Lupe who was diapering the Cockerel, her mouth full of safety pins, her black braids falling down the back of her long-sleeved white cotton nightgown.

"Please, may we eat our breakfast at once, Tia? This very minute? I was not hungry for supper last night. I could not swallow a single bite, but now I am starved. Truly starved!"

Then, when everyone was seated at the oilcloth covered table, the twins still sleepy-eyed, their hair on end, she turned to Tio Felipe with humble, grateful eyes. "Do you know something, Tio? I wish it were not so early in the morning. The sunshine makes me wish that you could sing my favorite song."

Tio smiled. "And since when does music have to wait on the tick of a clock? That is news to me, I can tell you!"

He blew on his cup of coffee, took a hasty gulp, and wiped up a yellow puddle of eggs on his plate with a convenient tortilla. Then he reached for the guitar that hung on the wall, slung its red cord around his neck, and began to strum and sing.

The words went in this manner—"My heart is like a gourd dipper. It brims to overflowing. Let us dance and

clap our hands and make merry. I have happiness in full measure.'

At noon Nita ran to the corral. A shrill whistle at the barn door made her turn quickly. Bill stood there with Chavez, his big sorrel horse.

"Hi, Mex," he grinned awkwardly, "want me to saddle up for you? Kind of a hard job, isn't it, for a little squirt like you?"

It was his way of apologizing for his anger yesterday, and as Nita watched him cinch up Colorado she smiled back a shy forgiving *gracias*.

"Here comes Lou. Tell her to get a move on, will you, kid? Im heading for the upper pasture. You two meet me at the first gate, see? So long."

Bill rode off and Bugle, who had been lying asleep in the shade of the trough, woke up and trotted after him.

Lou nodded when Nita gave her the message about their meeting place. "Bill is going to part out a bunch of yearlings for Pa," she explained as she hurried to saddle Buck. "Then you and I will help him drive them on to the sudan grass up by Las Flores Creek. Bill was the one who thought up the idea of taking supper along. He got Mom to make sandwiches for us. I guess he wants to show he's sorry about all that row yesterday."

"But how did you know that it was not my fault?" Nita asked, puzzled.

"How? Oh, don't you know that I'm a detective? Sherlock Holmes the Second, that's me! You see, I remembered those sticky old candy papers that Inez threw all over the porch when we were trying to do the puzzle. Mom was good and mad about them. You should have seen the trail of ants out there this morning. Anyway, Neets, I just naturally knew you had more sense."

Nita's cheeks glowed. As they rode out of the corral and up a trail white with powdery dust, she hummed a tail end bit of Tio Felipe's song.

Reaching out her hand she picked a cluster of red rose haws to stick in her hat band. Summer was nearly over, she knew. Horse chestnut leaves had already shriveled and dropped. Purple elderberries had burst and spilled their juice. In another month she and the twins would be starting school.

She was going to have two new dresses. Tia had learned how to run the senora's sewing machine. The dresses would be cut Americana style from a pattern just like Lou's.

One would be plaid, one would be checked. There was going to be a warm red coat, too, that you could turn inside out for rainy days, and a dark blue sweater. The senora had explained to Tia Lupe exactly what a girl needed for school in town, and Tio Felipe had accompanied them on a trip to the stores and paid out his money with pride and pleasure.

"The cattle are over there, just beyond the ridge," Lou said as they rode close to the old adobe walls and the olive grove. "When we finish work, we'll have supper in the patio. Would you like that? Maybe we'll see some deer at the creek if it's not too late and dark. Make Colorado get a move on, will you? Bill will be needing us."

Over the ridge, inside the barbed-wire fence of a wide, eaten-down field, fifty or more cattle milled in a cloud of dust. Bill shouted to the girls above the bawling and mooing, and signaled with his sombrero.

"He wants me to help part out those heifers," Lou explained. "You ride over by the creek, Neets, and wait till we come along. If any of the heifers break for the water, head 'em off. We'll be in an awful fix if they get scattered down in those willows."

"But—but——"

"Now don't start that, Neets! You can do it easily. There's nothing to it. Leave everything to Colorado, he'll savvy what to do."

Lou loped off before Nita could protest further, and she was left alone to manage matters as best she could. Riding obediently toward the creek bank she reined in and watched anxiously as a long line of cattle began to file through the gate with the Sherwoods behind them shouting loudly to keep them moving.

"Get going! Get along there! Ya-hoo! Yippee!"

Suddenly a balky yearling broke from the ranks and

made a dash for the creek. There was nothing for Nita to do but follow out Lou's orders.

For the first time since she and Colorado had met one another, she dug her heels into his sides.

"Excuse me, if you please," she apologized, "but we must hurry, senor. It is of the greatest importance."

Colorado did not need any urging. His ears went back. His sleepy old eyes brightened. With a whirl and a lunge that sent Nita so far forward that the horn of the saddle poked into her stomach and left her breathless, he started for the creek.

Nita gripped the reins tightly, and hung on to the pommel with both hands, her eyes screwed shut. Had Lou not told her to leave everything to Colorado? Well then, what more sensible than to take such excellent advice?

It was terrifying to be carried along without knowing where she was going, and in a moment she opened her eyes and took stock of the situation. Then as Colorado circled back in a determined effort to head-off the heifer, she snatched at her hat and waved it wildly in imitation of Lou and Bill.

"Yippee!" she shouted daringly as she ducked under the low-hanging branches of alders and willows. "Yippee! Get going, Colorado! Get a great big move on, if you please!"

Colorado was delighted with the unexpected return of his old time cow pony days. Galloping along with

pounding hoofs, his mane flying, he chased the yearling along the bank and cut her off with quick turns and baffling twists.

Nita hung on, somehow. Her sombrero flew back, dangling by its leather thong, and she put up a hand to pull her braids free from a clutching branch just at the very moment that Colorado made up his mind to make another swerving whirl.

Her feet jerked free of the stirrups. She sailed out of the saddle and the ground came up to meet her, hard and unsympathetic. Colorado raced on a few yards and then he stopped, his reins dangling, and while he looked back with surprised eyes, the heifer turned to the bank again, triumphantly.

Nita sat up dizzily and then wobbled to her feet.

"Yippee!" she shouted valiantly. "Yippee!" and waving her arms like wind mills, she started to run after the heifer. "Get out of that creek, you crazy cow! Get out, I tell you! Don't you hear me?"

"You're the crazy one around here! Stop, Neets! Hey—wait! What do you think you are trying to do?"

With a rush of hoofs, a quick sliding stop and a cloud of dust, Chavez and Buck were along side of Nita and the Sherwoods were hanging out of their saddles their gray eyes half laughing, half wrathful.

"Who ever heard of rounding up cattle on foot?" Lou burst out, mopping her hot face on her shirt sleeve.

"Whew, did Bill and I streak over here when we saw you fly out of that saddle? I'll say! You hit the ground like a ton of bricks."

"Are you sure you're O.K., Mex?"

Bill asked the question anxiously. After all, the girls were his responsibility. A busted noodle wouldn't be so good.

Nita nodded. She was beginning to think the whole affair an enormous joke. Think what Roberto and Salvador would have given to see her zoom through the air!

"I am in the best of health, *amigos*," she assured them, bursting out laughing. "Do not look so long-faced, you two. See? I am still in one piece. Not so much as one small chip has been knocked off me."

Giggling, she strutted up and down for their benefit, and tilted her sombrero rakishly over one eye.

"What is a buck-off to a vaquero, I ask you? Pouf! Less than a snap of the fingers. I did not mind in the least."

"Yeah, but you'll be good and stiff tomorrow just the same," Bill warned her. "Wait a shake. I'll catch up Colorado for you."

He boosted Nita back into the saddle and grinned derisively when she gave a small involuntary "Ouch."

"Oh, so you don't mind spills, and the ground wasn't hard, eh, Cowboy? No, I bet not!"

He was off on Chavez then, and when the balky red

heifer had been run out of the willows, he and the girls turned the cattle into a field of lush green sudan grass that was irrigated by water from Las Flores Creek.

"You kids had better go on to the adobe, if that's where you want to have supper," Bill suggested. "I've got one more job to finish. Pa wants me to take a look at the pump, up creek. I'll meet you as soon as I get through."

"O.K. We'll save you plenty to eat, don't worry," Lou assured him, and she and Nita watched him ride away with Bugle running ahead, nose to the ground, hot on the scent of a rabbit.

Jogging along to the olive grove, they tied up their horses. By the time they were settled in the quiet, deserted patio the sun had dropped behind the dark pine-ridged mountains that faced the sea and the sky had faded from pink to mauve.

"I'm going to start eating before it gets too dark to find my mouth," Lou announced, exploring her saddle bag. "How about it? Ready for a sandwich? A piece of cake? Just help yourself."

Slow shadows began to drift over the patio's crumbling wall. Once, far up the creek, Bugle barked and they heard Bill whistle him to heel. It was a comfortable feeling, Nita thought with a glance around the lonely ruins, to know that a big boy like Bill, one who was almost a man, was somewhere near by now that twilight had come.



"Does Bill believe the story about the white coyote?" she asked suddenly. "I mean, Lou, does he believe the ghost part?"

Lou hesitated. "I don't know for sure. He always used to, at least I think he did, but now, well, maybe he has changed his mind." She laughed, and then sighed as she confessed, "I'm scared to ask him right out. I'd hate to have him laugh at me."

She cracked a hard-boiled egg and salted it with a sprinkle from a twist of wax paper, and went on with an independent toss of her head. "Maybe the coyote isn't a ghost. Maybe there's no such thing, but just the same if I like to think so, why shouldn't I? Whose business is it?"

Between bites of sandwich she sighed again, regretfully. "Oh dear! I wish people didn't have to grow up. Bill and I used to have packs of fun, but now he thinks he knows everything, just because he's fifteen. It makes me so mad!"

Nita nodded sympathetically. "It is the same with Roberto and Salvador. Now that their moustachios have begun to sprout they treat me like a baby."

There was silence after that, and then Lou yawned loudly as she ate a piece of chocolate cake and licked the frosting from her fingers.

"I hope the pump isn't busted. We'll never get home. I was up pretty early after those raspberries for you this morning." She yawned again, and then sat up

straight, alertly. "Listen, what's that? Did you hear a sort of yelp? A howl?"

Without waiting for an answer she jumped to her feet and grabbed Nita's arm. "Come on! It's Bugle. He's caught in a varmint trap, that's what's the matter, and Bill is too far upstream to hear him. Poor old Bugle boy! Here we come. We'll help you."

Stumbling through the dusk, guided by Bugle's pitiful howls, they found him at last under a clump of alders. His left front paw was squeezed in a steel trap that had been chained to a stump and set under a concealing tangle of leaves and vines.

Lou dropped on the ground and threw her arms around him. His first frantic leaps to free himself were over. Now he lay exhausted and whimpering, his brown eyes begging Lou for aid.

"Poor, poor fellow! Such a good brave boy! Yes you are, you are, and we'll get you out of this awful trap in just one second."

While she patted Bugle and comforted him, Lou turned to Nita. "See those springs sticking out on each side of the trap? We'll have to jump on them to get it open. I think the two of us together will be heavy enough. Jump as hard as you can when I say ready."

Nita waited for Lou's signal, and then she stamped down with all her weight. There was a sharp click, and Lou pulled Bugle's paw free while he wagged his tail and poked his cold nose in her face.

"He can't walk home like this," she told Nita worriedly. "Look how lame he is; his paw is terribly bloody and swollen. I tell you what—I'll hoist him up on Buck and go look for Bill. Bill can take him home the short cut over the ridge and straight across the canyon. I'll come back and meet you in the patio. You wouldn't like the ridge trail. It's too narrow and steep unless you're used to night riding."

"But—but you won't be gone long, Lou? Not too long?"

"Nope. I'll be back in a jiffy. The pump's not hard to find. I've been up there before with Pa."

It was difficult to haul Bugle up in the saddle and to settle him safely, but Buck stood patiently, and Lou managed it at last. "So long," she called back through the dusk as she started upstream. "Wait for me in the patio, Neets. I'll be seeing you."

Nita walked slowly back to the old wall. The olive trees were only blurred gray shadows, but they seemed like friends from home as she brushed against them in the gloom.

Pushing open the sagging, rusty-hinged door that led to the patio she sat down on the bench by the broken fountain. Somehow, now that it was night time, the little bricked garden seemed solemn and like a church yard. Was it because the tumbled-down arches spoke of a long ago day when there had been a chapel in La Casa de las Flores? A candle-bright, gilded altar

where padres from Monterey had come to say prayers on special feast days? Or was it because Lou's soldier boy ancestor lay buried under that mound where the oak tree spread its wide branches?

Like the olive grove that spoke of home, the thought of a countryman lying so close, so peaceful, lessened her loneliness as the long moments dragged past.

She would be glad, very glad, when Lou came back, she told herself as stars pricked through the evening blackness and then a full moon rose to wash the patio with white light. It would be most cheering to hear Buck's hoofs ringing on the creek rocks. The patio was too quiet to suit her entirely. There was not even the rustle of a leaf on the still air. Not a bird's cry, nor an owl's hoot.

"I will cough," Nita decided uneasily. "That will be better than nothing."

She had just got ready to clear her throat with a timid ahem when she stiffened, and clutched the bench tightly, and stared with terrified eyes at a gap in the crumbling wall.

Something was creeping through the hole. Something whiter than the moonlight. Something with a slinking, lean old body. Something with gleaming yellow eyes, with a thin tail and pricked ears.

As she sat frozen, the creature padded stealthily to the patio door, whining and snuffing as though asking for an unseen hand to open it. Then it put back its head.

An eerie mournful howl came from its throat, and like an echo, was answered by the voices of a dozen hidden running mates lurking high on the ridge and in black brushy canyons.

Again and again the long fluctuating wail tore through the quiet of the sleeping hills. Then with a quick whirl, his nose raised to sniff suspiciously as though he had caught Nita's scent on an up wind, the creature was gone as swiftly, as mysteriously as he had come, a pale loping form lost in the night.

Nita pulled herself up on shaking legs. Her heart thumped. Her scalp tingled and her hands were icy.

"Lou's white coyote! Tolo! Oh, it was! It was!" she told herself over and over as she kept on staring dazedly at the wall where there was nothing now but the empty moonlit hole.

"I saw him. I know I did. I was not asleep. No one could dream that howl."

Trot. Trot. Trot.

The everyday sound of a horse's hoofs from the olive grove, a whinny from Buck that was answered by Colorado, told her Lou was back again.

"Hi! Hello there, Neets. Did you get tired waiting? Did you think I was lost?"

Lou shouted cheerfully when she was fifty yards away, and then slipping off her horse, ran into the patio.

"Why, what's the matter? Have you lost your voice?"

Nita could only stand dumbly, swallowing hard.

Then at last she managed to stammer, "Oh, Lou! I saw the white coyote. I saw Tolo!"

"Wha—at?"

Lou stared at Nita incredulously. "Wake up," she jeered, laughingly. "Wake up! No wonder you didn't hear me. You're half asleep."

Nita shook her head. Her eyes were enormous, her face awe-struck in the moonlight. "No, Lou. I saw him. I know I did."

"But Neets, that's silly." Lou shook Nita's shoulder. "You fell asleep, I tell you. Why, it just couldn't be true. Even if you didn't dream about him, it was only a shadow—a bush moving, maybe, the way it was for Bill and me that time."

"No, it was more than that. Much more."

Nita's voice came in breathless gasps as she tried to convince Lou. "Please, please believe me. I am telling the truth. I saw him as clearly as I see you. He was white all over. Thin, too, and very old. His ears stood up. He was like a dog in some ways, only different—wilder—I do not know just how to say it. He whined at the patio door. He scratched, and wanted it opened. Oh, do you not understand, Lou? Do you not remember it was the same way when he ran the thorn in his hand and begged the senora, your grandmother, to help him so many years ago?"

"Whew! Golly fish hooks! Holy Mackerel!"

Lou collapsed on the bench with a long whistle of

amazement. "That's the craziest thing I ever heard! If you're just trying to fool me I'll never speak to you again as long as I live!"

Her eyes stared around the patio, and now they were as awed as Nita's.

"I've always wanted to see that coyote more than anything else in the world," she said with a shiver, "but now—well, now I'm glad it happened to you instead of me. Ugh, it's too spooky!"

With a bewildered shake of her head she added, "You're the funniest girl I ever saw. Los Toros scare you to death, and you won't even stick your head under water when we go swimming in the creek, but a ghost doesn't bother you one single bit. You're twice as cool as any cucumber I ever saw."

"I was much afraid at first," Nita answered slowly. "I shook all over. But then, after that, I knew at once that he would not hurt me. That he just wanted——"

She stopped in the middle of the unfinished sentence and stooped to pick up the saddle bags and the remnants of supper. "We must go now, Lou. Tia will worry if I am too late."

"So will Moms and Pa. Bill told me to get started pronto. He and Bugle went the short cut just the way I thought they would."

Riding single file, the girls took the trail that smelled of tarweed and sage and that was wet with night dew. Nothing much was said as they rode along, or as they

unsaddled their horses at the barn, but Lou lingered a moment by the corral gate before they took their separate ways to the big white house and the cottage by the creek bank.

"Ghosts are fun," she said awkwardly, with an embarrassed glance at Nita's face which was still as awed and wide-eyed as it had been in the patio. "But we're too old, don't you think, to keep on really, truly believing in them?"

Then, uncomfortably, as though she wished she had never mentioned Tolo's story, "You wouldn't be such a great big booby as to let an albino coyote fool you, would you, Neets? 'Member, I told you how hunters find white pups ever so often in a litter? And are you sure you understand about legends? That they're just fairy tales—made-up fairy tales?"

"Si, I understand, Lou."

With a hasty *buenas noches* Nita hurried away. She wanted to be by herself to think over something that could not be put into words. No, not even to Lou.

How had the old legend ended?

'And ever after Tolo will return to all those whose hearts belong to the rancho, whose hands serve it, and whose courage shall guard it.'

For a moment, back there in the patio, she had been certain that the white coyote was trying to tell her that he had especially chosen her to perform some brave

deed that would save Rancho Estrellas from grave danger.

After all, had she not learned to love the rancho dearly? Could not the washing of the senora's dishes, the saying of little prayers for el patron count as humble ways of serving it?

But no, Lou was undoubtedly right. The coyote could only have been an albino.

As she scurried along the lonely path to the cottage Nita had to admit it. Most surely Tolo would never bother with a girl who dodged past tree stumps, imagining the worst in every shadow. He would not put his trust in some one whose knees knocked together every time a bull bellowed from the hillside, or an owl hooted in the cottonwoods.

To Tolo, the word courage was all important. Alas, she did not possess a single scrap. No, not so much as one small crumb of bravery.

Chapter VIII

NITA wakened the next morning to a smell of onions and chili peppers and melting yellow cheese that floated in from the kitchen. Tia Lupe, she knew, was making enchiladas. This was the twins' birthday and she had promised them a very special treat.

"Perhaps Senorita Lou would enjoy supper with us tonight?" she asked when Nita ran in to get her breakfast. "Senor Bill, too? I think that to have company would make a true celebration, do you agree?"

"Si, si, Tia. A most perfect idea!"

Nita squeezed her aunt's fat waist enthusiastically, and then as soon as she had finished a cup of Julita's milk, a new-laid egg and a freshly baked tortilla, she dashed out of the cottage to deliver Tia's invitation.

The path was the same one she had scurried along last night, but now in the bright sunshine it looked quite safe and ordinary, and it was a simple matter to consider the white coyote nothing more than a trick of moonlight, a half-forgotten dream.

Rushing through the Sherwoods' gate she bumped squarely into el patron.

"Well, well, Miss Whirlwind, why the rush? What's up?"

"A thousand pardons, senor!"

Nita blushed crimson as el patron pretended to stagger against the fence and then to regain his balance with the greatest difficulty. "Believe me, I did not mean to knock you down. It is just that I am in a great hurry to find Lou. Tia Lupe invites her and Bill to help us make a little party tonight. A fiesta, you understand, for at five minutes past noon, exactly, Roberto and Salvador will be fifteen years old."

"Fifteen? Why, they are getting to be regular old men."

El patron looked astonished as though he wondered how anyone could reach such a ripe old age.

"Just wait here for me a minute," he said mysteriously. "I think this news calls for a conference with my wife."

He hurried into the white house with a thump of boots and a jingle of spurs, and then he was out again almost at once, a smile creasing his sun-tanned face.

"Come on! Show some of that speed of yours! We've got plans to make. Let's find your aunt and see if she approves what I've got up my sleeve."

An hour later Nita and Lou were stretched out under the shade of a walnut tree in the Sherwood garden going over the details of those plans.

"To think, Lou, a supper and a bonfire at Seabird

Beach! All of us, you understand—everyone in your family and mine, and Juan, too. Your father will drive us in the truck.”

“Yes, and Mom’s bringing fried chicken to go with the enchiladas.”

“And Tio has a watermelon from our back yard. A big, beautiful striped one. Oh, Lou, such a fine peek-neek I have never heard of in my whole life before!”

Nita’s small face shone, and then she added soberly, “I did not think I would ever want to see the ocean again after—after the time on the rocks, but now I can hardly wait. Oh, those so darling sandpipers! The shells, the beautiful waves, the white foam!”

“Promise not to say a word about those rocks, Neets,” Lou warned anxiously. “Mom would have a fit. She’d just about die! I bet she wouldn’t ever let me go any place alone again if she found out.”

Shamefacedly, she confessed, “I wasn’t supposed to go out on the point, see? Pa and Moms always told me to stay on the beach unless Bill was around. I guess it would have served me right if——”

“No, no, Lou, do not say such a terrible thing.” Nita clapped her hands over her ears, horrified. “Do not let us ever, ever, talk about it. Let us only remember the nice part. Tell me, can we wade again tonight? What is the sea like in the dark?”

“The blue goes out of it, but the moon makes it like a mirror. You’ll like it, Neets. You’ll like it lots.”

That evening, about six o'clock when the chores were over and Tio and the boys were home from the barn, the Valdez family dressed themselves in their best clothes and hurried down to the front gate in order not to keep el patron waiting so much as one minute.

Tio and Roberto and Salvador had submitted to hair cuts. Tia Lupe, as barber, had trimmed their locks neatly around the rim of a yellow mixing bowl, and enough black hair had fallen to the floor, she declared solemnly, to stuff a pillow.

After that she had sprinkled them generously with a lovely cologne from the drugstore in town, that smelled of vanilla extract and a great many flowers.

All three had thrust their brown feet into woven, raw-hide hauraches from Nueva, green and red striped serapes were slung over their shoulders in case the night turned chilly, and Tio and Roberto wore their sombreros, although Salvador had aroused a sharp envy with his brown felt hat, banded and feathered in the stylish Americano store-in-town manner.

Tia, too, smelled of flowers, although she wore a sober black dress and the rebosa over her head that was suitable for a sedate matron. Proudly, she held the Cockerel in her arms, and as he poked inquisitive fingers at her dangling silver earrings, he sucked hard on his embroidered bib and wriggled rebelliously in a stiffly starched dress that left little red marks in the creases of his plump neck and dimpled arms.

Nita had discarded her jeans and stout brown shoes. She was barefoot, so that she need not waste a single second running into the waves, and she wore the long, ruffled blue skirt, the white, round-necked, puffed-sleeve blouse that had been hung away, neglected, ever since her first day on Rancho Estrellas.

At the last moment she picked two of the bright red zinnias that flaunted against the fence and stuck them through her braids, and as they all waited eagerly for the toot! toot! of el patron's horn, she knew, with satisfaction, that the Valdez family was indeed a gala group, and more than ready for the birthday celebration to begin.

The truck arrived with a squeal of brakes and a shout of greetings. Mrs. Sherwood, sitting in front beside her husband, moved over to make room for Tia and the Cockerel. Everyone else piled in the back next to Lou and Bill and Juan, who were already settled, and wedged themselves somehow between picnic baskets, Tio's guitar and the gigantic watermelon.

Riding high on top, where it could not be squashed, was a long, stick-like package that el patron refused to discuss.

"Hands off," was all he would say. "Hands off and no fair peeking. That means you, Bill Sherwood, and you too, Bugle old boy. Stop sniffing. It's no use. I'm not going to let you in on this. You'll find out soon enough."

Jolting along a narrow road that climbed out of the valley oaks and cottonwoods, the truck crawled higher and higher until it reached redwood and ferns and then, with the smell of salt in the air, the rugged cliffs above the beach.

El patron parked, and the passengers climbed out and trudged down to the sand with laden arms, and while the boys began to dig a pit for the bonfire, Lou and Nita ran off to gather driftwood.

This was an excellent excuse for wading, and Nita tucked up her ruffles and let the cold foam swirl around her ankles.

Although the blue had not quite faded, the water was mostly dark green, under the pink sunset sky, and then, as Nita watched the red ball that hung just above the horizon drop out of sight, everything, sky and rocks and sea alike, turned to purple.

When they ran back at last with their driftwood, the girls found Tio Felipe in a highly indignant state. Juan had called everyone's attention to the truly amazing resemblance between his friend and the moustachioed bull seals that barked on the rocks. Frowning fiercely, Tio had armed himself with a long strand of seaweed, like a riata, and threatened to lasso the first impudent fellow who dared call him Papa Sello.

One thing led to another, and finally there were some strenuous wrestling matches with Roberto and Salva-

dor and Bill and Tio and Juan rolling on the beach and kicking sand over the entire party while shrieks of protest came from Mrs. Sherwood and Tia Lupe as they spread supper on a big tarpaulin, and urged everyone to calm down and begin eating.

The enchiladas, heated in an iron pan, were smoking hot. Cheese bubbled out of them in yellow pools. The coffee pot boiled over, hissing a warning, and the fried chicken was waiting to be picked up and munched. There was even a bag of dog biscuit for Bugle, and when he had tired of racing along the beach after gulls and sandpipers, he settled down beside Bill and crunched contentedly.

"Sing for us, Tio," Nita begged, when she and Lou had finished their second slice of watermelon and had stretched out to watch the dying bonfire.

Tio nodded. Strumming his guitar he began the song of a flea who set up housekeeping on a little yellow dog's tail. Establishing a permanent home, he raised a family of children, and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

"Great-great-great-greats, too," Tio explained gravely as he struck a final chord. "But twenty verses are enough for anyone."

After that he gave them the song of a rat who lived in a maize field. He taught Lou and Bill and their mother and father the chorus so that they could all join in with the Valdez family about Senor Ratón, Senor Ratón,

with eyes so bright and heart so merry that farmers did not mind in the least if he ate up all their crops.

The music put the Cockerel to sleep, and wrapped in Tia's shawl, he nodded against her shoulder. The moon rose and made a silver path across the water. Lou had said that the ocean would look like a mirror at night, but Nita decided privately that it was more like a sparkling net. Rancho Estrella's stars were caught in it like golden fish.

When at last Tia Lupe and the senora began to hint reluctantly of bedtime, el patron stood up, his mysterious package in his hand.

"We are going to have a few fireworks before we go home, if there are no objections," he announced. "These are left-over Fourth of July rockets, and I do not know a better reason to fire them than in honor of the twins' birthday. How about it, *amigos*? All those in favor say aye. All those opposed, no—The ayes have it."

There was a shout of approval, and el patron put the boys and Nita and Lou to work building a high sand tower.

"Here is to Roberto!" he shouted as the first rocket shot into the sky from its parapet and burst in a glittering shower far out at sea.

"Here is to Salvador! Many many happy returns of the day. *Viva Mejico! Viva los Estados Unidos!*"

Rocket after rocket streamed into the sky and exploded gloriously. As the last one plummeted into the

waves Nita wished with all her heart that there could be another and another and another. A pity, indeed, that every night could not be as silver and as golden as this.

She was too sleepy to talk as the truck rattled home but after all the good-nights had been said and she was putting away odds and ends of picnic leftovers in the cooler, she turned to Tio with a blissful weary yawn.

"Just think, Tio, a year ago, back in Nueva, we did not know that from now on all our fiestas will be here on this so beautiful rancho, did we?"

"No, it is true that California was not even a dream, *querida*," Tio answered slowly as he rolled a yellow cigarrillo paper and licked the edges together. "But you are mistaken about the fiestas. I have had a long talk with el patron today. He has helped me with a plan to keep Nueva for our true home."

"Our home? You mean, Tio, that we will go back again? Oh—oh, Tio!"

Nita whirled from the cooler. She stared at her uncle out of startled disbelieving eyes.

"Come, come, Nita mia, why do you look at me like a poor little frightened bird? After all, is it such a terrible thing that we return to Mejico? No, I do not think so. Quite the contrary if you ask my opinion."

Puffing on his cigarrillo, Tio Felipe began to explain.

"It is this way, *muchacha*. El patron knows that I am beginning to feel a homesickness here, in my heart," he

said, thumping his chest so that Nita would see exactly where his longing for Nueva lay, "and it is the same with Tia Lupe. El patron understands that we could not be content here if we stayed on for always, year after year, so far away from our own land. Because he is so smart a man, a man with big fine brains, he has solved the problem. Why do I not go back to Nueva once a season to farm our field, he asks, and then when summer comes, could we not return to Rancho Estrellas and help him just as we have done the past few months? A most practical scheme, let me tell you Nita, and one that I shall snap at quick as a wink."

"But—but Tio! We were hungry in Nueva. We were ragged. How can you forget how much you longed to get away? You said that California would be like heaven. You said so, Tio! Many many times I heard you say so."

"Si, Nita, but things are different now. Very different. With my summer wages from el patron I can buy a new field. A field with fertile soil and plenty of well water. I can buy a young strong burro, a new cart. I can even find a partner who will be glad to go shares with me and look after matters when I am here on the Rancho Estrellas. Oh, yes, you will see, *querida*. I will manage it all splendidly."

Tugging at his moustachio he added gravely, "Tia Lupe and I have learned a lesson. We had to leave our home to find out how much we love it, and because we have been strangers in a strange land we know now

that money in our pockets is not the only worth-while thing in life after all."

"Yes, but you have Juan here, to be a friend, and Cousin Gordo in town, and el patron and the senora are so good, so kind. Oh, Tio, please, please can we not stay? Think how mixed up we will be with one foot here, and one foot there, and all the miles of traveling in between."

Tio sighed and puffed out a wreath of white smoke. "Si, Nita, for a little while we will feel like people who have been sawed in two," he admitted, "but soon we will get used to trains and miles. A journey will mean nothing, nothing at all."

His brown wrinkled face shone with pride as he put his hand over his heart again. "Do you know why I have much happiness deep inside here, *querida*? It is because el patron tells me that *los Estados Unidos* will always receive us as welcome visitors. Yes, think of it, Nita! El patron says that I, Felipe Hernandez Jose Ignacio Valdez am a credit to our country! Are you not proud of old Tio to hear that?"

Then, a little anxiously, as Nita did not answer, "You do not think me a boaster, *querida*? You understand that I am only so glad, so very glad to have el patron's approval? So happy that our country can be proud of me and my family? You see, little one, it is from visitors like ourselves that the *Americanos* learn to judge their

next-door neighbors from Mejico. We are the ones who can make them smile, and shake hands and say 'glad to see you, amigos,' or we are the ones who can bring a frown that means, 'Keep out. We do not want your kind here.' "

Nita still did not answer. With a resentful bang she slammed the cooler door, and then because of the hurt in Tio's eyes, she ran to him repentantly and threw her arms around his neck. Most certainly she loved him. Oh, yes! And of course she was proud of him. Only why, why did he want to leave Rancho Estrellas?

With her face hidden on his shoulder she told herself, with resignation, that it was because grownup people were always different. One as old as Tio could never be expected to understand that Nueva had faded from her thoughts, little by little, until now it was nothing more than a place in a half-remembered dream.

Lou, and the hills, and Hermosa and an unborn colt had pushed home aside to make room for themselves. The river that sang her to sleep every night, the river with its blue dragonflies, its red-stilted cranes, had made her forget the shallow twisting trickle where she used to play, just as the patio of Casa de las Flores had dimmed her memory of the little shepherd's hut with its thatch of mud and sticks and reeds.

She would go back to the plaza and the pigeons and the tall cathedral and to her market basket.

“Limes for sale! Juicy limes! Avocados! Jasmine! Carnations!”

Everything would be exactly the same as ever except that now it would be Rancho Estrellas that had to take its turn at being nothing more than a dream.

Chapter IX

IN THE next few days Tio's plans took definite shape. With el patron as his advisor, letter after letter flew between California and Nueva. Finally it was decided that the Valdez family would stay at Rancho Estrellas until just after New Year's Day, and then Tio would take possession of the fine field that he had been longing for and that his Americano dollars were buying at last.

As the hot long summer gave way to autumn's yellowing leaves and then to a dry bitter-cold winter, Nita began to cherish each day as though it were her final one, ever, in California and she sucked its goodness slowly, slowly, like a stick of candy, to make it last.

Ever since the opening of school, which had been late so that the valley children could help with the harvesting of tomatoes and walnuts and prunes, she had driven to town with Lou and Bill and the twins.

She was learning to speak English, and to read and write it. Even with Inez Lompo sitting at a near by desk,

she liked school. She liked Senorita Miss Weston, her teacher. She liked the smell of chalk and ink and lunch boxes, the shouting and laughter at recess.

One particular morning Nita snuggled down in her red coat, shivering, as they drove along the frost-rimmed road. She was glad to be squeezed between Bill and Lou instead of sitting in the back of the truck where Salvador and Roberto huddled.

Rancho Estrellas needed rain more than ever. There had been a few showers in October and November, just enough to start the grass, but not enough to keep it growing, and now here it was the day before Christmas vacation, with nothing more encouraging in sight than a dull sky and a few gathering clouds.

San Benito, it seemed, had been too busy to listen to her prayers for el patron. At least, he had been dangerously slow about answering. Another few weeks without a good hard soaking and the rancho would be in for a season even worse than last.

When they reached town, which was not very big in spite of its drugstore with soda pop, and its cinema, she was glad to hurry into the cheerful schoolroom where a black, round-bellied iron stove roared, its lid glowing cherry red, and where Senorita Teacher had turned on the magic electric light against the gray gloom outside.

They were to study geography first of all this morning, Miss Weston announced as the class took its seats. She showed them a map pinned to the blackboard.

They were to copy it, please, with mountain ridges to be shaped out of putty, with painted rivers, and with black dots for cities and towns.

"The map is of North America," she explained. "Do you see, Nita and Inez? This part, down here, is where you used to live, you know, so you must take pains to draw it very nicely. Make the river stand out importantly. It is the Rio Grande, of course, and it is the dividing line between your country and mine."

Nita began her outline. She smiled a little to herself as she reached in her box for a blue crayon. Senorita Teacher did not know that the name Rio Grande was much too fine a one for the sleepy sluggish stream that meandered past Nueva. Mostly, at home, it was known as Old Man Sandy Bottom, or *el Tardo*, the Slow Poke.

When the river was finished and the small dot put down that meant Nueva, she added something more. A small lopsided affair with four wiggly walls and a tipsy roof that looked just enough like a house for Tio to know that she had drawn him a picture of the sheepherder's hut under the willows. She had placed it exactly where it belonged, on the far side of the stream where one could wade across easily through the shallows, and she had even sketched in a little lamb by the doorway to make the whole scene as real as could be.

Yes, Tio would be pleased to know that she had not forgotten altogether about Papa's and Mama's little house. She would present him with the map at supper

time, and she was certain, because he considered her an excellent artist, that he would hang it up on the wall in full view just as he had done with so many other drawings she had brought home from school.

When recess came, Lou ran over from her desk to admire her work of art, and Inez, not to be left out of anything that might prove the least bit interesting, crowded close, staring critically.

"It's perfect," Lou passed judgment, between bites of an apple and hard stamps of her heels as she cracked walnuts on the floor. "Just perfect—but then, no wonder you are good at geography, Neets. You have traveled and awful lot. Just think, I've hardly been off the ranch! Sleeping on trains must be packs of fun. You're lucky."

Before Nita could answer, Miss Weston walked past, slipping her arms through her brown coat. "Come on girls, better get some fresh air, and Lou, will you pick up those messy walnut shells, please?" Then with a glance at Nita's map and an approving smile, "That is really splendid work. Some day you must tell the class about your trip up from Mexico. They would enjoy hearing all about it—all the interesting sights you saw along the way."

"Nita was the best sight of all," Inez broke in with a sly giggle, determined that Senorita Teacher should pay her special attention. "She looked like a clown, let me tell you, walking through the big station. You would have had one big laugh! Roberto's overalls, mind you,

three sizes too big! An old hat of Salvador's pulled down over her ears, and her hair all tucked up inside! Oh, yes, it was most funny, Senorita Weston! But you, Nita, you did not care how you looked, eh? Anything was better than not getting across the border at all, was it not?"

There was an odd silence. Miss Weston turned to Nita with a puzzled, "My goodness, child, did you really arrive in boy's clothes? Well, I expect they must have been nice and comfortable for traveling." Her voice trailed off in an uncertain little laugh as she saw Nita's face crimson furiously, and she walked quickly to the door. "Hurry up, girls. Right outside, please."

Nita watched her go with terrified startled eyes. Her heart pounded. Even Inez looked abashed, as though she wished she had kept her tongue between her teeth.

Lou tried to laugh, just as Miss Weston had. "I wish I'd seen you, Neets. I bet you were a scream." But her laughter, too, trailed into awkward silence as she saw the mounting fear that crept over Nita's small unhappy face.

When recess was over, and she had come back to her desk, Nita sat lost in blank despair while reading and writing and arithmetic and spelling went on all around her.

Once or twice she caught Miss Weston's eyes on her. There was a question in them, a sort of speculating wonder.

"She is thinking about those boy's clothes," Nita

told herself with a sick feeling in her stomach. "She is thinking about them, over and over. She knows that no matter how poor Tio was, I could have had a skirt to wear, even if it was only one of Tia Lupe's made smaller. She knows that there was a big reason, somehow or other, for those overalls."

At lunch time Inez hurried over to the bench where Lou and Nita and two other girls were eating. She opened her brown paper bag and took out a tamale.

"Try it, Nita," she urged. "Mama made them fresh last night."

Nita shook her head.

"But it's good! Look, olives and chicken and chilis and everything just like the ones at home." She pulled open the edges of the corn husk wrappings, and gave Nita a peek at the stuffing inside, but Nita only shook her head again and fumbled in her own bag, hoping that certain embarrassing drops would not splash publicly on her orange, and on her rolled up tortilla and mashed frijoles.

Lou jumped up. "Let's play hopscotch," she suggested quickly. "Come on, everybody! I'm frozen stiff sitting still."

She did not know what was the matter with Nita, but it was plain that something had gone terribly wrong and that Inez, too late, was sorry for whatever trouble she had started.

At three o'clock Miss Weston dismissed school.

"I would like to speak to Nita just a moment. No, Lou, I want you to run outside and wait."

Miss Weston did not look at Nita when they were alone in the quiet schoolroom. While the big clock ticked, ticked, ticked on the wall, she sat straightening her desk with pretty, manicured fingers. She filled her fountain pen. She laid her ruler in a neat line, just so, and snapped an elastic loudly around a roll of spelling papers.

"I wonder," she said at last, slowly, still not looking at Nita, and careful not to notice the fright that had turned her black eyes into wet unhappy pools, "I just wonder if there is anything worrying you, Nita? Anything that you would like to talk over with me, or perhaps with Mrs. Sherwood if you don't think you want to discuss it with your family? Anything—anything about your trip to California, for instance?"

Nita shook her head. Poor, poor Tio! Now, without doubt, *Senorita Weston* would have him put in jail. Poor Tio who had brought a *sobrino* instead of a *sobrina* to *los Estados Unidos*.

Teachers were important people. They could bring a whole pack of *oficiales* down on a lawbreaker. *Senorita Teacher's* father was an *oficial*, himself. The sheriff, no less, of the whole county. He wore a silver badge that said so. There was a *pistole* in his pocket, Roberto and Salvador had told her, with awe. He was a big tall *senor* with a gruff voice. She had seen him. He had come to

the Thanksgiving Day play when she had been a Pilgrim in a gray dress and a white paper collar and cap.

"I—I do not know what you mean," she answered at last in a small shaking voice. "I do not understand, *senorita*."

Miss Weston sighed. She was thinking to herself, "No, I suppose not. You are like every other Mexican child I have ever taught. Stubborn as one of your own burros, and 'no savvy' unless you want to."

Aloud, she said sharply. "Please, Nita, don't be so silly about this. Just tell me why you crossed the border in boy's clothes. Wasn't that rather an odd thing to do?"

"But—but so comfortable for traveling, as you said yourself, *Senorita Teacher*. And—and also, Tio and Tia were very poor, you understand. I had no——"

"Nita! That's enough! Don't tell me any fibs that you'll be ashamed of afterwards."

Standing up, she put a hand on Nita's shoulder. "You may go now, but my father and I are going to have supper with the Sherwoods tomorrow night—we're old friends, you know, and perhaps I will have a chance for another chat with you. I'm determined to find out why Inez managed to make you look so frightened, so troubled. I like you, Nita, very much indeed. I want to help you any way I can. It is a pity that you are starting vacation with some sort of load on your mind."

When the truck drove into Rancho Estrellas at last Lou squeezed Nita's hand. "Let's go down to the barn,"

she whispered. "We can talk there. Nobody will be around till milking time."

Nita nodded. She hurried inside to tell Tia Lupe that she was safely home, and to change her plaid dress for jeans. She gave the Cockerel a quick hug, and watched him for a moment as he staggered from Tia's rocking chair to his crib, and back, on fat strong legs. California had made him grow. So had Julita's milk and all the fresh brown eggs. Pretty soon he would stop wearing dresses. He would have trousers, with grownup buttons.

Oh—trousers!

All of Nita's worry flooded back again. She ran to meet Lou and climbed into the hay loft after her.

"Tell me what's the matter," Lou demanded excitedly as soon as they were settled on a sweet-smelling rustling stack. "What was the idea of Miss Weston keeping you after school? That darn old Inez! I bet it was all her fault."

Nita shook her head. "Inez did not mean to make such a big trouble. No, truly, Lou. To be sure, she is still mad about the affair of the pig, but she did not do this on purpose. She would not hurt Tio Felipe. She would not want to get him into such bad, bad trouble. What she said just slipped out without her thinking."

"Phooy!" Lou snorted inelegantly. "Don't let her fool you. She's just plain mean. But what's it all about? What does it matter, if you wore boy's clothes on the train or not? If she's making fun of you—if it's because—

because—well, I mean, just because Tio didn't have enough money for dresses and things——” Lou floundered helplessly, and ended with a dangerous flash of her eyes, “I'll fix her all right! I'll show her she can't talk to my friends that way.”

“But Lou, believe me, it was not because we were poor,” Nita burst out with the unhappy truth. “It was because I had to be a boy. That's what the passport said. A nephew, instead of a niece.”

Flinging herself full length on the hay Nita began to sob as though her heart would break.

“Oh, Lou, everything is most terrible. Tio will go to jail. All his plans will be spoiled. It is all my fault. It is all on account of me. I wish I had never been born!”

Lou's eyes popped. She reached over and gave Nita's braids a hard yank. “Turn off the water works! Start explaining. Begin at the beginning—or how can you expect me to know what you are talking about, Neets? It's all too mixed up sounding.”

Nita sniffled, and used her sleeve for a handkerchief, and when her sobs had subsided to gulps, she began to tell her story.

She started with Mama and Papa going to Paradise, which was undoubtedly nice for them, but difficult for their small daughter, and about Tio and Tia giving her a home. About all their kindness, and about Tio's loyalty in refusing to leave her behind when the matter of her passport arose.

"Poor Tio!"

Nita dissolved in tears again. "Poor poor Tio! Oh, do you not understand? He never told a lie in his whole life. He has never cheated. He did not mean to break the law. He was only trying to cut those hard knots——"

"Knots? What on earth—?"

"Red tape knots," Nita hiccupped. "Red tape is what the *oficiales* tie you up with in Mejico when you are a traveler. All Tio wanted was to hurry, hurry, so that he could get here quickly and not lose the so fine job *el patron* was holding for him."

"But I still don't understand, Neets. Why are you worrying about Miss Weston? What's she got to do with it? She can't put Tio in jail."

"No, but her father can," Nita wailed. "Her father with the badge and the *pistoles*. They are coming to have supper with your family tomorrow night. They will find out everything. I know they will. I know it! After they put Tio in jail they will send me back to Nueva. I won't go! I won't! I want to stay here on Rancho Estrellas."

"But you always told me you liked Nueva," Lou broke in, astonished at the distress in Nita's woebegone face. "When we were at the beach you said the sandpipers reminded you of the pigeons in the plaza. You said you liked the boys and girls you used to play with. You even said Tio's little turquoise house was prettier than the cottage. Yes you did, Neets, you can't get out of it."

"I know, I know—but that was at first, Lou, when everything here was new and strange. If the *oficiales* find out about the *sobrino* and the *sobrina* they will not let me come back here, ever, ever. Now I know why Tio was so proud when el patron told him he was a credit to his country. That is the way I want it for myself, too, Lou. I want to be free to cross the border any time I choose, like—like an *amigo*, the way Tio explained to me, with *Americanos* shaking hands and saying they are glad to see me. I do not want to hear 'Keep out. You broke the law. We are ashamed of you.' "

The barn grew cold when the afternoon sun had sunk behind Los Viperos peak, and all the yellow glint went out of the stacked hay. Lou shivered, and got up stiffly from her cross-legged squat.

"Come on, Neets. It's like I tell you—Mom or Pa are the ones that ought to hear about this. They can fix it up. They'll talk to Tio, and tell him what he needs to do to get your passport straightened out."

"No! No, Lou."

Nita clutched Lou's arm imploringly. "Please do not say anything yet. Tio would hate it, he would feel disgraced, I tell you, if el patron found out what he has done. Let us wait a little longer. *Senorita Teacher* will forget, perhaps."

But *Senorita Teacher* would not forget, Nita knew in her heart. She would feel it her duty to find out what

was troubling her pupil. She would not stop until the whole affair was in the open.

Suddenly, clearly, Nita knew what she herself would have to do to save Tio from the threat of a sheriff's badge and jail. She knew the only solution.

At the corral gate Lou said an uncomfortable good-bye. She did not know how to comfort a person who had cried so hard that her eyes were pink, her nose swollen, her voice nothing but a choked quaver.

"Golly, Neets, try to cheer up. Nobody on this ranch will let Tio go to jail. Not on your life! Pa wouldn't stand for it. He'd chase anyone who tried it off the place so fast you couldn't see 'em for dust." Uncertainly she added, "Of course I don't know anything about the law in Mejico, so I can't say for sure, but I bet no one would be mean enough to send you back to Nueva all by yourself. Come on, don't cry any more. Have you forgotten about tomorrow being Christmas Eve? We'll trim the tree, and have loads of fun. Just wait till we get to stringing popcorn and cranberries! Yes, and I know lots of presents you're going to get, too, Neets. A whole pile of them! Beauties!"

Nita made an attempt at a watery smile. "And I know some for you, too, all tied up in red ribbon."

She put out a *thin little brown hand then and laid it* on Lou's arm. "Adios," she said soberly. "Adios, Lou, until we meet again."

She turned and ran toward the cottage, and Lou watched her until she was out of sight. With a worried sigh she wished that Nita did not take everything so seriously. She had been bad enough about old Tolo and the white coyote, but this matter of the *sobrino* and the *sobrina* was ever so much worse.

It had been awful, perfectly awful, to watch her cry. She herself had not done such a thing since she was—well, not a day over seven years old at the most. That had been for something really hurting, like the time when her finger got caught in the car door and was slammed on.

Foreigners were probably different, though. Maybe there was just naturally something leakier about their tear ducts, you never could tell. She wouldn't make fun of Neets for being a cry baby. Most certainly not. The best thing a friend could do was just try and help all she could. Tomorrow she would beg Neets again to let Pa and Mom handle the situation. They could fix anything. They were good that way.

Chapter X

SUPPER was over and Nita was in bed listening to the rain that had begun to whisper lightly against the window pane. A sudden wind blowing out of the west meant that a storm was on the way at last.

Resolutely she made her plans. Rain or shine she was going to run away in the morning. Casa de las Flores would be the best place of all to hide. She would stay in the hills until the sheriff grew tired of looking for her. He would hunt and hunt, but he would not like the rain and the wind and the slippery trails.

He would be like that policeman at home the time when Miguel Garcia broke the café window with his ball. Miguel had managed to hide himself well. The policeman searched hard, and then gave up finally with a shrug. Who, after all, was Miguel Garcia to take up the time of a busy man? And would it not be the same now? Surely Senorita Teacher's father had other things to do than ferret out a little nuisance of a girl like Nita Valdez.

She did not want to run away. Just to think about it

was frightening. And oh, worst of all, how cruelly she would hurt Tio and Tia. No one would dream that she, the coward who ran at the sight of a bull, who put her fingers in her ears at talk of snakes and bobcats, would dare hide herself in the wintry lonely hills.

No, they would think of the river first of all. With the coming storm it would flood its banks. They would think she had slipped off the footbridge. With a shudder, she turned over and hid her face in the pillow. Tio—Tia—to hurt them so! But she had to do it. There was no other way.

El patron might be able to save Tio from jail when the *oficiales* came after him, but for her it would be a different matter. They would not hurt her. They would simply say, "Go back to Nueva where you belong." They would send her away in black disgrace. They would never, never give her another passport. She would lose Lou and Rancho Estrellas for ever.

She fell asleep at last, worn out with terror and worry, and then awakened again to a gray half-hearted drizzle. The promised storm had blown itself away, just as all the others had done.

Because the hills looked so far away, so cold and forbidding, Nita made excuse after excuse for putting off her flight. She patted out a fresh batch of tortillas, she swept the kitchen. She made a doll for the Cockerel out of a corn cob and a dish towel, with crayon eyes and mouth and knitting yard for hair, and then after lunch

when Tia Lupe had waddled to the hen house to set a trap for 'coons, she knew that she could not wait a moment longer.

She buttoned her red coat and hood over her jeans and a warm flannel shirt that had been Lou's last winter. She stuffed a bandanna with tortillas and apples and slices of cold pork and slung it around her neck, and then she slipped out of the back door and ran to the corral.

Bill or the twins, Juan, or Tio might be at the barn, she knew, but she would have to take the risk. It was the only way she could find the trail to Casa de las Flores. She would not have Colorado to carry her. She would be on foot, and the way led, she was certain, straight out the corral gate, up the hill through the wild roses and elderberries, and then turned left at the big oak where the salt blocks were scattered for the cattle.

At the blacksmith shop she took a short cut through the lower pasture, her shoes, mired with mud and manure, squelching through puddles that had begun to mirror patches of timid blue sky.

Buck and Colorado and all the other horses had been turned out to graze an hour or so earlier. Their flying hoofs had left sunken prints in the earth like little cups, where meadow larks were dipping their beaks and tilting their throats to drink the rain water.

At the top of the first rise she looked back to say goodbye to the cottage that squatted like a wet, bedraggled

hen on its nest of frost-blackened geraniums, and then she began to climb straight up through a thicket of scrub oak and scarlet-berried toyon.

As the trail grew steeper and steeper her breath came in panting gasps. A sharp stitch pained her side. Her aching legs protested every step she took.

She was afraid to stop and rest. Her red coat could be all too easily seen by sharp eyes in the valley. She would have to wait until she topped the ridge and was safely out of sight on the other side.

Climbing on and on she at last sank down on a fallen log. How high she was. How far above the river. How hard to remember that its banks had been her favorite place to play last summer. But what was the use of thinking about the happy, happy summertime? Tomorrow would be Christmas. Christmas for everyone but herself. She would not have so much as a smell of turkey dinner. She would not know how the senora's mince pies and plum puddings turned out, after all her work helping to mix them.

She would not see the beautiful shining tree that el patron and Bill had cut in Pine Canyon and set up in their parlor. She would not have the joy of giving Lou the rawhide watch chain and matching hat band that she had braided so painstakingly under Tio's helpful direction.

Unhappily she got to her feet again. Winter afternoons were short. Already flocks of mountain quail

were calling grace before supper, and brown doves, winging in for a drink from some hidden spring, warned her that evening was on its way. She must hurry and reach Casa de las Flores before dark. Yes, and those black gathering clouds look ominous. Soon they would push away the bits of blue sky and turn on their drenching spigots.

San Benito had not forgotten Rancho Estrellas after all. This was going to be a real storm. Perhaps she had better break a staff to help her along the trail in case it grew slick with 'dobe mud. A long stout elderberry branch would be just right.

When she had twisted off a low branch, Nita started on her way again. Poison oak twigs reached out to scratch her hands and face. The trail was tangled with blackberry vines. Gray spikey buckthorn tore at her legs. Twice she tripped in squirrel holes that lay hidden under the mildewed stalks of last year's mustard.

Picking herself up after her last fall and wiping the mud from her skinned knees, she stiffened abruptly, her black eyes staring.

The print of a big paw lay directly across her path, fresh and unmistakable. A paw print bigger than a bobcat's. A paw that could only belong to a mountain lion.

Her heart pounding, overwhelmed with the knowledge of how alone she was, she looked around her fearfully. Ahead she could see the upper pasture, quiet now

and empty, with dusk beginning to fold it in shadows. Surely, surely she need not be so terrified. How Lou would laugh at her! How the twins would tease! Lions never came this close to barns or houses—or hardly ever—and was that not supper smoke right down there in the valley, blowing hazy and blue?

Too, on second glance, the pasture was not entirely deserted. Over there, just where the field gave way to a wild brushy mountain slope, Hermosa was contentedly cropping her supper.

“I will go and visit her a little while,” Nita decided. “I will not feel so lonesome if I have someone to talk to, and then if I hurry I can still reach the Casa before dark.”

Immensely cheered at the thought of company, she trudged on, but she had only gone a yard or two farther when a shrill neigh made her stop short again.

Oh—oh—what was it? Why had Hermosa screamed like that, so suddenly? What was the other sound? The thin pitiful squeal that came twice before it died away?

Straining to see through the dusk, Nita found the answer to her questions. Hermosa had foaled. She had stolen away to this quiet hillside to have her baby in peace. A newborn colt lay beside her on the cold ground, but over its body, still wet from birth, a gaunt creature was crouching with bloody claws and a switching tail.

“Go away! Go away!”

Looking frantically for a rock, anything at all to throw, Nita snatched up a clod of cow dung and hurled it with all her might. Then brandishing her elderberry staff, and shouting as loudly as she could command her shaking voice, she charged down the hillside.

“*Dios, Dios,*” she begged as she ran. “Oh, *Dios mio*, make it true what Tio says, that lions are cowards, even worse than I. That they will not stand at bay. That the smell of a human being is terrible to them. Make it true won’t you, please? Please—please——”

Then in the half second that flashed before the crouching lion caught her scent, she brought her staff slap, smack, against its tawney loins.

The lion whirled, rank-smelling, and yellow-eyed. Without a sound, on pads that were stained with torn flesh, clawed from the colt’s side, he ran to cover. The dark brush beyond the pasture fence line stirred with his passing and was still again. The deep canyon swallowed him as though he had never been.

Nita dropped beside the colt. It lay motionless, its eyes closed, and in the fading light she could not see how badly it was hurt. She could only feel the warm blood that trickled from its raked shoulder and spread in a wet blotch against her jeans.

Half a dozen yards away, Hermosa pranced and sweated, her dark eyes wild, her nostrils flaring. Crazy

by the lingering musky reek of the lion she circled her foal anxiously, one minute shieing from Nita with a shrill whinny, the next, crowding close with a rear and a plunge.

“Poor Beautiful One! Do not be so frightened.”

Nita spoke softly, pleadingly, while her own heart raced and thumped. “Please, Beautiful One, will you not try to understand? I won’t hurt your baby. No, No! All I want to do is think of some way to help him.”

While she tried to sooth the mare Nita’s eyes were fixed in horror on the red stream that dripped steadily from the colt’s wound. Was he dead, she wondered? Had his little life sped so soon?

Perhaps if she could stop that bright flow— A sponge was what she needed. Would grass do, or bunched up oak leaves? No, leaves were too prickery. Fern would be better than anything else at hand.

Hurrying back through the twilight shadows she pulled frantically at the coarse tall brakes that grew along the trail, yanking handful after handful. Then with the colt’s head on her knees, she pressed them hard against his torn shoulder. When the wads grew sticky and sopping, she threw them aside and pressed others in their place.

Slowly, slowly, as the minutes dragged past, dark night fell. When at last the fern fronds dried, and stuck fast to the crusted wound, Nita dared to shift her cramped legs as she glanced anxiously at the black sky

where lightning zig-zagged, and thunder rolled above Los Viperos Peak.

Somewhere in the bushes there was an owl's hoot, lonely and mournful, and high on a ridge a coyote howled. Swift as an echo, that long-drawn-out cry made Tolo's story rush to Nita's mind. He was real—of course he was real. She knew it now, once and for all, in spite of Lou's scoffing. How easy to guess what he was trying to tell her! How plain to see that he had chosen her, after all, to guard the rancho's greatest treasure. Yes, he was counting on her to save el patron's little good-luck charm that lay here in the pasture so still, so hurt and cold, so nearly dead.

"Listen to me, Hermosa," she ordered sternly, with a voice that quavered only slightly as she wondered what it would feel like to have the mare's hoofs thud down on her head, or crush her spine, "Stop that crazy prancing, and pay attention. We have to hurry home. Some way or another, your baby will have to get on his feet. I am afraid to leave you both alone while I go for help. You know as well as I that the lion might come back if the night wind carries him the smell of blood. Besides, even if he stayed away, your foal will surely die on this cold muddy ground. You will have to trust me, Hermosa, so please, please Beautiful One, won't you stand back while I do the best I can?"

With Hermosa trembling and snorting distrustfully at every move she made, Nita took off her coat. "This

is too small for a real blanket, little colt, but it is better than nothing, and perhaps if I lie on top of you, just softly, softly, so that you will not get squashed, I might be able to make you one tiny bit warmer. There—how is that?”

As she tucked the coat around him, and felt for a heart beat, Nita was certain that the little horse was dead.

“But I will not let you be,” she whispered fiercely. “No! No! I will not let you, do you hear me?”

While her teeth clicked with cold, she cupped her numb hands, over and over again, and blowing in them, laid their brief warmth against the colt’s flanks. When a ringed, pale moon came out from the scudding clouds for an instant, she saw that he was the same pure golden color as his mother, and that he had the white mane and tail of a true palomino. Like a brand, a small star was blazoned in the exact center of his forehead.

Gently smoothing his baby crest of mane, she marveled at its silvery glisten.

“How each of your little hairs shine—like dew beads on a spider web. Like the bright trail of a snail. Like the under side of aspen leaves when they flicker in a breeze—and later, when you grow up, *amigocito*, all the beautiful thick ripples will hide the scar of your poor clawed shoulder.”

Nita lay across the colt a long long time. Her eyes closed, then flew wide, over and over again. She was

too cold and stiff to go to sleep, too afraid that the lion might come back. Then at last when there was a faint stir under her, a hint of warmth like a candle's breath, she knew that the foal lived.

"Open your eyes," she begged, her voice unsteady with joy as she hugged him and laid her cheek against his. "Open your eyes little star colt. Please, won't you, for Nita who is so happy? Come, *Estrellito mio*, try to lift your head. Try. Just try. You see, that is splendid. You can do it perfectly well if you make up your mind. Yes, and you can stand up, too. Oh yes, that is what you must do right this very minute. Be quick, little horse. The rain drops are beginning to fall on us. We must start down the trail, *pronto. Muy pronto.*"

It was easy enough to say, but how could she persuade the colt to get to his feet? He was much too heavy for her to lift all alone. Most certainly, he would have to do some of the work himself. Well then, might not his tail serve as a handle for a good hard jerk that would stir him to make the effort?

It was only after half a dozen vain, discouraging tugs that she gave up, and then, suddenly, with new hope, she remembered watching the horses in the corral. Why, of course. Hadn't she noticed time after time that when they finished rolling or sleeping, they always got up front legs first?

Trying fresh tactics, she managed to pull and strain, and at last to brace him, until the colt was actually off

the ground supporting himself on two wobbly legs, and then staggering on all fours, his sides heaving, his little head down, lolling pitifully. "Bueno! Good for you. How brave you are! Now, Hermosa, are you not proud of your son? I must ask you again, though, to behave. Have you no sense at all? If you trample me, how can I be of any help? Follow as close as you like, but no more of that shoving, you understand? Just be patient a little while longer. We'll be home in no time, and then you can have your baby all to yourself, I promise."

With the rain beginning to pelt in drops as big as buttons, Nita put an arm around the colt's neck, steadying it, and coaxing it step by step down the slick storm-smudged trail.

As she led the way slowly through chemisal and sage, and wild rose thickets where sleepy blue-jays pulled their heads from under their wings and took indignant chattering flight, she knew with sick miserable certainty that her chance to run away was lost. Lost for good and all, because at el patron's house, the sheriff was waiting for her with his badge and his pistole. There was no possible escape.

With all heart she longed to desert the colt. Longed to let him stagger on alone, and take the chance of falling and dying, while she ran to safety in the hills.

No, no! She could never do that, not possibly, now that a way had been so clearly shown her, a chance



given her, to pay her debt to Rancho Estrellas. Her debt for el patron's kindness to humble strangers. Her debt for Lou's friendship. For the hills and the river, for the stars and the blue sea and the moonlight.

With Hermosa at her heels, neighing distraughtly, and pushing close, Nita trudged ahead unhappily, doggedly, under a drenching down pour, the colt's legs bumping against hers as it stumbled along, its hoofs, small as a fawn's making little splashing noises as they flicked through muddy puddles.

Every few minutes she stopped to let it rest, holding it close in a soaked, limp bunch, and each time she stopped she looked over her shoulder, gripped with dreadful fear.

Perhaps Tio had just been trying to gloss over the truth. Perhaps mountain lions were not cowards, after all. Would that stinking gleaming-eyed creature take a chance and slink back after its prey? Was it hiding behind those bushes even now, licking its bloody chops, ready to pounce again? And—and would being eaten up hurt terribly terribly much?

On and on she plodded through the darkness and the wet with only a faint gleam from a rancho lamp far below in the valley for a beacon. Then when the trail turned abruptly, losing itself in a snarl of underbrush, the pin point of light disappeared entirely.

With something warmer and saltier than raindrops

trickling down her cheeks, Nita came to a helpless standstill. Oh, Tolo, Tolo, if only you had chosen some one who was wiser about these dark hills!

It was the sound of rushing water and the lash of windswept willows against her face that made her cry out gladly, confidently.

"I know where we are, Hermosa. But certainly! We are not lost. That is the creek we hear, and somewhere, close, now, we will find the olive trees. They will lead us to Casa de las Flores, and I think it would be a good idea if we stayed there, out of the rain and wind a little bit, at least, until morning. I can easily find the trail home by daylight, and it will not matter leaving you alone, once the sun is up, for Tio says that lions do not like to prowl except at night time."

Pressing her cheek against the colt's drooping head, she told him comfortingly, "As for you, poor New One, your troubles will soon be over. El patron will come after you in the truck and give you a nice ride home. You will like el patron a great deal. He is most kind, most good. He will poultice your shoulder so that the hurt goes away, and give you and your mother a fine warm stall with plenty of dry hay to lie on. Will that not be fine?"

The colt, for an answer, only shivered and staggered. Nita's arm tightened around his neck and she turned to Hermosa again.

"We must not worry," she said bravely. "Many

times people get well, no matter how sick they have been, and that is the way it will be with your foal. Tell me, do you see those humped-over shadows ahead? Are they not the olive trees? Yes. We have reached the casa."

With the rain sloshing down on her like water from an over-turned bucket, she led the colt through the broken archways of the old house and close against the shelter of the patio wall.

"Now you are going to have your supper," she told him, and coaxing the mare close, she guided his nose close to his mother's full udder.

"Drink," she commanded. "Hurry up about it, little horse. Do not keep your mother waiting any longer."

With his small rump hunched, his head down, the colt sagged on buckling knees. Then lurching, and nudging closer, he sniffed, and explored, and began to drink. Slowly at first, and then with noisy instinctive greed, he sucked harder and harder, butting his small pointed ears against Hermosa's side.

His belly filled and grew taut. A pink glow colored the thin transparent lining of his tiny nostrils. A warm dribble of milk oozed from his velvety lips. Replete at last, he nickered softly as though to say, "*Gracias, madre mia*. That was a good supper. After all, it is quite nice to be born."

Then his black lashes blinked over big bright eyes, slender golden legs folded under him and he collapsed,

fast asleep, with a quiet breathing that was as tranquil, as steady, as a napping Cockerel.

"You are going to live! You are going to get well!"

Wanting to shout out loud with delight, Nita covered the colt with her raincoat again, and watched as Hermosa took charge of her foal, moving close to nuzzle him, and to share the warmth of her body.

The fierce noisy fury of the storm was over now. The big drumming drops were giving away to a quiet steady patter against the patio bricks. There was no more thunder, no terrifying flashes of lightning.

Brr—how cold it was, though. Swinging her arms and blowing on her fingers, Nita began to walk up and down under the archways.

Gladly, she remembered the bandanna slung around her neck. The torillas and pork slices were limp in their wax paper wrappings, but hungrily, gratefully, she stuffed her mouth, and swallowed in big gulps. Nothing could taste half so good, not even Tia's gobbler that was to be roasted for Christmas dinner.

Christmas? It must be Christmas this very minute. Over there in the east a faint light was breaking. Somewhere the morning star must be hiding behind the rain clouds. Quietly, surely, Christ's Birthday had dawned here by the willows of Las Flores creek, in spite of dark lonely hills, in spite of a lion's claws, in spite of the troubled heart that had made her run away.

She did not mind about missing the tall beautiful

pine tree in the senora's parlor with its tinsel and candles, its cranberry and popcorn strings, its pile of packages marked 'Nita.'

No, because to give Lou and el patron and the senora and Bill the one present they wanted most of all, was going to make her happier than opening a dozen of her own. Just think what she had for them! Not a package tied with red ribbon and tissue paper. Oh, no, not at all. Something alive! A starry silver-maned little horse who had brought back the lost luck of Rancho Estrellas. Brought back the rain to dry hills where grass would grow again higher than a vacquero's stirrups, and where cattle branded with the S bar S would fatten under the oaks.

Turning back to Hermosa, as she threw away an apple core, she patted the mare, and stifled an enormous yawn against her wet mane.

"I am tired, Beautiful One, aren't you? It has been a long night, but never mind, I will go for el patron now. It is light enough so that the lion will not come back, and soon we will be warm and dry."

With a tight hug around Hermosa's neck, she added soberly, "I am happy for you. El patron will not have to sell you now. All your life you can stay right here on Rancho Estrellas."

Then with a wistful glance around the patio, "I do not know when I will ever see Casa de las Flores again. Never, I am afraid, once the sheriff catches me. Perhaps

I will not even have a chance to see you or your colt, either, but just the same, I have much to be thankful for. Oh, much indeed, Hermosa—and do you know something? Lou told me there used to be, a long time ago, a little altar around here somewhere, so I think I will kneel down a minute. Perhaps the Christ Child would like it if I told Him how glad I am about your baby and about the rain. Perhaps He would like it if I wished Him a *Feliz Natividad*.”

Chapter XI

IT WAS late afternoon and Lou turned from the rain-blurred windows with an impatient sigh. "I wish Neets would hurry! I'll never get the tree trimmed if I wait much longer. What do you suppose is keeping her, Mom? I thought she'd be here right after lunch."

"I imagine her aunt needed her, Lou. After all, Christmas Eve is a pretty busy day you know. Why don't you start stringing cranberries? Nita won't mind. There will be plenty of other things for her to do when she gets here."

Lou agreed disappointedly. She threaded a needle and poked it through a glossy red cranberry. Her fingers were juice-stained and she had finished a long festoon by the time she jumped up again and stared out into the rain.

The path to the barn was nothing but a puddle. The corral was ankle deep in mud. Streams of water hissed off the tin-roofed barn, and her father and Bill were standing by the gate letting the rain pour down on

their slickers as though they, too, were thirsty hillsides gratefully soaking up every drop.

Lou ran for her own slicker. "I'm going out with Pa." she shouted back to the kitchen. "I want to get wet straight from the skin out."

Mrs. Sherwood laughed. "Very well, but come in and taste this stuffing first, will you? Does it need more salt, sage, or anything?"

Lou licked the spoon approvingly. "No, it's O.K. Just right. Won't you come out with me now, Mom? Just think how the rain will feel on our faces."

She stretched out her arms toward the windows with a shamefaced laugh. "I keep wanting to hug the rain," she confessed. "I want to hug it and hug it, and let it run down all over me. Even the way it smells is the best thing ever."

Mrs. Sherwood's blue eyes smiled sympathetically as she untied her apron. "I know—and it's wonderful, being sure that it's a real storm this time, with the barometer dropping lower every minute. It's going to make this Christmas the happiest we've ever had."

While her mother tugged at galoshes, and buttoned her coat, Lou waited on the porch and looked with a questioning frown in the direction of the cottage. Even if Nita was too busy to stay and trim the tree, why hadn't she raced over for a minute or two, at least, to rejoice about the rain?

The Sherwood family was watching the steady down-

pour slant in silver spears against the hills, and listening to the roar of el Diablo as it rose higher, higher, when Tio Felipe appeared around the corner of the barn.

Seizing el patron's hand he pumped it vigorously.

"How glad I am, senor! Glad from my heart! A magnificent storm! The very perfection of rain! You could not ask for better, eh?"

Then with a beaming face and snapping black eyes, he turned to smile at Lou. "But where is my Nita? Surely she does not mind a little wetness on her head? Or is she too busy with the so beautiful tree that she cannot bear to leave it?"

"But Tio, she isn't at our house. She hasn't been over all day. I have waited and waited."

Tio's smile broadened. "That is because my Lupe has kept after her, I wager. Such a dinner being prepared! Such big goings-on for tomorrow! I shall stay well out of the way until supper time, I can tell you. The house is no place for a man—not when my Lupe gets busy."

El patron nodded. "You're right, Felipe. The ladies have no consideration for us poor fellows. If Bill and I had our way we wouldn't show up until time to eat turkey and open presents."

While Tio went off to milk Julita, the Sherwoods splashed back to the house. Bill and Lou, beside themselves with joy and excitement, chose the biggest puddles to wade through, and there were screams of

laughter when the sticky adobe mud pulled off Lou's rubbers and left her floundering.

She was scraping her feet on the doormat when Mrs. Sherwood urged her to hurry.

"You and Bill finish the tree, will you, dear? After that you had better set the table. The Westons are coming for supper, don't forget. Put on the blue plates, and give us all fresh napkins, and open a jar of peaches. I have quite a lot to attend to yet—tomorrow's pies, and the rolls to get out of the way."

When the last strand of tinsel had been draped on the tree and a star and an angel set on top, Lou ran to the pantry. The peaches made her think of Nita again. For a moment it was summer, with Nita and Tia washing dishes while she and her mother peeled fruit and made syrup and screwed the lids on hot, clean jars.

When a car drove up to the gate a little later, only one guest appeared. His daughter had been kept home with a cold, Sheriff Weston explained, warming his big rough hands by the fire, and whistling in tune with Mr. Sherwood who was sitting at the piano picking out, with one finger, the strains of *Silent Night* and *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

When they all sat down to supper it was plain that el patron's appetite, as well as his good spirits, had returned with the rain. It was Lou who could not eat and whose thoughts turned uneasily to Nita and her dread of badges and pistoles.

She had just shaken her head at apple dumplings and cream when there was a sudden commotion at the front gate. Footsteps pounded on the porch. Loud knocking sounded at the door. When Bill rushed to open it, Tio and his sons burst out of the darkness and storm with an incoherent, desperately alarmed report of Nita's disappearance. They had searched everywhere for her, senior. They had shouted and shouted above the wind and the rain and the clap of thunder.

El patron and Bill and Sheriff Weston were in slickers and rain hats, booted, and equipped with flashlights, before the story was half told.

"Lou, you stay with your mother," el patron ordered sternly as she dashed for her coat. "No, you can't come with us. This is men's work." And then as they filed off the porch he put a hand on Tio's shoulder. "We'll try the river, first."

Lou stared after them, her eyes horrified, unbelieving. Mrs. Sherwood put her arms around her. "Shall we go down to the cottage and keep Tia Lupe company? Please, darling, don't look like that. Nita wouldn't be foolish enough to go anywhere near the river in a storm like this. No, she's much too sensible."

Lou tried to feel comforted, but while she watched the blink of lights among the cottonwoods and willows she knew all too well what the searching party dreaded to find—a soaked bundle of clothes caught on a low-hanging branch. Black braids tangled in a cruel swirl of

frothing water and uprooted bushes and washed-out fencing.

Then, at the cottage, where Tia Lupe rocked back and forth weeping, and cuddling the Cockerel, her brown pock-marked face a mask of grief, an unexpected clue was found.

When had Tia last seen Nita, el patron and the sheriff asked patiently as they all trooped in out of the wet, grim and baffled. What time had it been? Was she wearing a coat, as though planning to go out?

Bewildered, unable to remember any of the details of her bustling day, Tia waddled to Nita's room and searched behind the curtain on a string that served for a closet. Si, senors. Si, the coat hook was empty, and here was a letter from off Nita's pillow.

El patron read it aloud. It was written on a page torn from a composition book. It was to keep Tia and Tio from worrying too much.

I am sorry to run away but I must. I will come back. I leave you my love.

Your Nita.

Shocked, and dumb with astonishment, the Valdez family could only stand and stare. There was a gasp from Mrs. Sherwood. "But—but I thought she was so happy here. I thought she liked us all so much. I simply can't understand why she would do such a thing."

"I know why she did it! I know!" Lou cried out un-

happily. "Oh, Moms, Pa, it's because—" With a frightened glance toward Sheriff Weston she stumbled on recklessly. "It's because her passport said she was a *sobrino* instead of a *sobrina*. Inez Lompo told on her—part way. Neets was scared, terribly scared. She didn't want to get Tio into trouble. She didn't want to be sent back to Nueva. Tell them about it, Tio. Please, please do! It's the only way to make things right again."

Every one stared at Tio Felipe. Roberto and Salvador shuffled uneasily, and moved a little farther away from the sheriff, while Tia Lupe crouched down in her rocker with a terrified whimper. It was easy to see that she, as well as Nita, lived in fear of *los oficiales*.

With his black troubled eyes on el patron's face, Tio told a straightforward story, ending simply, "I am telling you the whole truth, Senor Sherwood. I did not mean to break the law, believe me if you please. As I told Nita, I thought only to use my wits for scissors to cut the red tape."

When he had finished, and the little room was still except for the creak of Tia's rocker and the crackle of stove wood, Sheriff Weston exchanged glances with Mr. Sherwood and then cleared his throat with a gruff ahem.

"So that's it, eh?" and glaring at Tio with a frown that brought his red bushy eyebrows over his nose in a fierce tangle, he warned menacingly, "Better forget about those scissors of yours the next time you cross the

border, understand? You wouldn't like our jail. The grub isn't much to boast off, and the beds are strictly second rate, I'm told."

Bill, standing next to his father, snickered. If the sheriff took matters lightly enough to crack a joke, you could be fairly certain that everything was going to turn out O.K.

El patron smiled a little, too, as he nodded at Tio, reassuringly. "Don't worry, Felipe. Sheriff Weston will get you out of this mix-up. He'll clear it up with the immigration people right away. All we have to do now is find Nita. The poor little kid. If only she had told us what was on her mind. Didn't she say anything at all to you, Lou, about her plans? Why on earth didn't she realize this whole affair was something we could straighten out in five minutes?"

At that, Lou astounded everyone in the room by bursting into tears. She was so worried, so miserable that she could not hold them back another minute. Foreigners, it seemed, after all, were not the only ones with leaky tear ducts.

"Grown-ups can always fix things," she wailed, "but children have to do the best they know how. It's not fair to blame Neets. It's all my fault! I should have told you and Moms about it no matter how hard she begged me to keep it a secret."

Clinging to her father she sobbed remorsefully, "It's

my fault I tell you—and now what will happen to her out in the dark in all the rain and cold? She's the worst scaredy cat you ever saw. She just about dies if a bull bellows, so what will she do with thunder and lightning and wind coming down on top of her? She's nothing but a—a dinky little half-pint! We've just got to find her. We've got to, Pa!"

Mr. Sherwood fished out a big, tobacco-smelling handkerchief from his pocket and moped her face.

"Pull yourself together, old-timer. There's enough water around here tonight without your flooding the house. We'll find your little Neets. Just try to think hard about every possible place she might pick for a hideout."

"But that's the trouble, Pa. I can't think of a single one. Oh, don't you understand? She wouldn't even want to stay in the barn loft alone. An owl hooting, or a bat flying around, would give her a fit, and if she heard a coyote howling up on the hill she'd jump clear out of her skin——"

With a quick, startled squeeze she clutched her father's arm the moment she had said the word 'coyote.'

"Now I know where she's gone," she cried urgently. "Hurry up, Pa! She's hiding at Casa de las Flores, I bet anything. That's my secret place—mine and Bill's—but I told her about it 'cause we're best friends. Neets loves it up there. She's always talking about it."

Clutching her father still harder, she asked anxiously, "Is it mean of me to give her away? Will she hate me for it, Pa?"

"No. You're using your good common sense. You aren't spoiling a friendship, Lou, you are helping to make a better one. The sooner we find Nita and get this passport worry off her mind the better, and the sooner she's out of the wet the less chance of her catching a serious cold."

Turning to Sheriff Weston he asked, "How about taking the truck to the first rise and then hiking the rest of the way? The horses'll never make it through the mud."

"Let's get going, then. Come on, you fellows," and at the sheriff's curt nod of approval, the door slammed and the men hurried to the car shed.

Lou heard the slosh of mud, the sputter of a cold engine, and watched the glare of yellow headlights against the hillside. After that there was nothing to do but wait and wonder if Neets was lost for ever. Funny little, skinny, brown Neets, so ready for laughter and play, so understanding of everything that you felt in your heart about Rancho Estrellas—every joy, every worry, every bit of pride for its hills and streams, its valleys and deep canyons.

Tia's lamp began to flicker. Its flame grew pale. The first gray hint of morning drifted through the windows. A rooster crowed, and then another. Far off, high on the

hills, there was a honk, honk of the truck horn. A triumphant signal that meant Nita had been found.

Through rain that drummed harder than ever against the panes, Lou and her mother and Tia Lupe watched the truck crawl down the slick trail. Oddly enough, Hermosa was plodding close behind, her head drooping with weariness, and every step she took a gallant effort.

When the truck drew up at the gate Lou was waiting, wild with excitement.

"Neets, Neets, are you all right?" she implored of the blanketed bundle that was squeezed on the front seat between el patron and Tio. "Did they tell you that everything is all fixed? That you don't have to worry any more?"

But Nita did not answer. She was fast asleep. Her hood had fallen off and her braids were plastered against her pale face. Tio put a warning finger to his lips as he lifted her out and carried her to the house.

"Shhhh, if you please, *senorita*. She is most tired, my poor *muchacha*."

El patron put an arm around Lou. "We told her, as soon as we found her, that her troubles were over. She was too worn-out to talk, but she understood, and she smiled at me, that little shy smile of hers, you know, and said '*gracias, muy gracias, senor*,' before she fell asleep. Now go take a look at what Bill is holding. Nita gave us a Christmas present. I think you'll like it."

"A Christmas present?"

Lou whirled to stare at Bill. Grinning, he pulled up a corner of the tarpaulin that was spread in the back of the truck. Hermosa's foal was stretched across his lap just as fast asleep as Nita.

"Not bad, huh, Lou? Just a little something that your half-pint Mex pulled out of a lion's mouth," he drawled. "Just a little something she thought might be nice to have around the place."

Later, when Tia Lupe had peeled off Nita's soaked clothes and tucked her under the blankets, still sleeping, with Mrs. Sherwood's hot water bottle at her feet, Lou tiptoed in for a final peep before she herself went home to bed.

"Good-night, Neets, sleep tight. Don't let the fleas bite," she whispered, repeating the rigmarole that she and Bill called down the hall to one another every night before they turned out their lights.

Then with a little pinch, a tiny wiggle of what she knew must be one of Nita's toes outlined under the covers, she added humbly, from the bottom of her heart, "I take it back about the scaredy-cat. I take it back a million times."

Chapter XII

NITA slept until nearly noon on Christmas Day. Wakening to the steady beat of rain, the roar of el Diablo, she sat up, sleepy-eyed and bewildered.

What was Lou doing, sitting beside her bed? Was that the senora smiling in the doorway?

"Hello, Neets! Have you finished snoozing?"

Lou was laughing now, and pulling back the covers, impatiently. "Hurry up and get dressed. Don't waste all day! I bet you're surprised to see us. We came to sit with you while your family drove to church with Juan. We went early, you see—and we knew that Tia Lupe did not like going off and leaving you alone—or her oven, either. Golly, but the kitchen smells good! Hurry and get up, I tell you. You're missing everything. Christmas will be over if you don't get a move on. It's half gone already. I thought you'd never wake up."

"Nita can dress much faster if you stop pestering her," Mrs. Sherwood advised wisely. "Scoot along to the kitchen, why don't you, and keep an eye on things? And tell me, Nita dear, would you like me to bring you

some breakfast, or would you rather wait for your dinner? It will only be a half hour or so before everyone gets home, I imagine."

"Then I will wait, thank you," Nita decided, overcome at the thought of the senora carrying her a tray. "But please, will you tell me, how is the little horse? How is Hermosa?"

"They're both fine, just perfect," Lou broke in. "I guess we won't ever be able to thank you enough, Neets, for what you did. You ought to hear what Bill thinks about you! He's down at the barn right now. He won't leave that darling, darling colt for even a minute. Neither would I, except that I wanted to stick around and be sure you wouldn't wake up with pneumonia or something awful like that."

When Mrs. Sherwood put a firm stop to Lou's chattering by sending her out of the room, Nita jumped up and flew into her clothes.

Running to join Lou in the kitchen she stopped short on the threshold of the little sitting room. Spinning around on her toes like a ballet dancer, she squealed with surprise and pleasure. No wonder Tia Lupe had been so busy with holiday preparations!

A big clay olla hung from the middle of the ceiling. It was stuffed to overflowing with brightly wrapped packages.

"Lou! Lou! Come and look. This is what we have in Mejico instead of a Christmas tree. Tio will hit the

olla with a broomstick. He will bang it hard until it cracks open and all the lovely gifts fall down on our heads. Horns to blow! Harmonicas! Whistles! Candy and fruit! Nuts, too, all gilded, with little mottoes and jokes inside! Just wait—you will see what fun it is.”

Nita’s breathless, excited whirling stopped, then, as suddenly as it had started. Up from the depths of Tia’s rocking chair rose el patron whom she had been too entranced to notice before.

Taking his pipe out of his mouth he smiled, and with a low polite bow, shook hands.

“Good-morning, young lady! How is our beater of lions this morning? Our senorita of the elderberry staff?”

Nita’s brown cheeks crimsoned. “Please, senor, do not tease me. It was only a small thing.”

“Small?”

Lou, rushing in from the kitchen, stared goggle-eyed.

“Small, did you say? Why Nita Valdez that is the craziest thing I ever heard! Don’t you know that you are the very bravest girl that has ever been anywhere around here? You are going to be in the town paper! You’ll be famous! ‘Local ten-year-old beats off mountain lion.’ ”

Mrs. Sherwood, with a big stirring spoon in her hand, turned from the stove long enough to give Nita a little hug. “Never mind! Don’t look so frightened. You don’t have to be a heroine unless you want to—we like our

plain everyday girl just as much. But isn't that the car I hear? We had better stoke up the fire. Your family will be cold, and soaked. Oh, isn't it perfectly wonderful to hear that rain come pouring down?"

A dripping Tia Lupe put her plump hand on Mrs. Sherwood's arm as she bustled out of the storm and hurriedly stripped off the Cockerel's wraps.

"Please, senora, will you do us the honor of sharing our dinner? Think of the pleasure for us. No, do not say that you will crowd us. There is always room for guests, and Salvador and Roberto can easily find boxes for chairs, and planks to lengthen our table."

Mrs. Sherwood hesitated, but Lou and el patron shouted "Yes! Yes!" louder than all her protests.

"But I have so much to do! You two seem to have forgotten about grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins arriving at six o'clock. Dinner won't cook itself, you know."

"We'll help, Mom. We'll work like everything, if you just let us stay a little longer. Goody, goody—hurrah for you! I knew you wouldn't be mean enough to drag us away."

When Bill had been sent for, and arrived grinning and enthusiastic, and bursting with new absorbing details about Hermosa and her foal, Tia Lupe set out her feast.

Beside the roast gobbler, there were little spiced meat pies called *empanadas*. There were *enchiladas* and a

platter of stuffed, sweet red peppers. There were frijoles with sharp yellow cheese melted over them, and bowls of olives, and high stacks of smoking hot tortillas.

For dessert, if any one had room left for it, there were macaroons made of Rancho Estrellas almonds, and glazed, syrupy tortas stuffed with dried apricots. There was a big pot of coffee, and there was wine that Juan brought as his Christmas gift.

Just before they all sat down at the table el patron happened to notice the map that Nita had brought home the last day of school. Tio had pinned it up proudly, just as she had known he would, right in the middle of the wall where everyone could see it.

"Did you draw this, Nita? You're quite an artist. Is it your home?"

"Not my real home, senor, it is the little house where I was born, before I went to live with Tio and Tia, you understand."

El patron nodded. "I see."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and knocked the ashes into the stove, and then as he moved toward the table, he glanced at the map again. This time his eyes were puzzled.

"Did your crayons slip, Nita? How did you happen to put your house in the wrong place?"

"The wrong place, senor?"

"Why, yes, you've got it clear across the river from Nueva."

"But señor, excuse me, but that is exactly where it belongs. Did my Papa not pasture his sheep every winter in that field across the shallows?"

El patron turned from Nita and spoke to Tio, his puzzled frown deepening.

"Are you willing to swear that Nita was born in that house? Is there anyone else in Nueva who would swear to it, too?"

"But of course, señor, with the greatest of ease. All that is necessary is to consult Padre Tomas, who baptized her."

El patron looked at Nita again.

"Tell me," he asked slowly, "did you ever hear anyone say that your Nueva river was the boundary line between Mejico and los Estados Unidos?"

"Si, señor. I heard it from Senorita Teacher the day I drew my map." With a little confiding chuckle she added, "Senorita Teacher was funny, let me tell you. Most funny, señor! Such a name as she gave our slow poke stream—el Rio Grande, if you please! Imagine it—el Rio Grande for Old Man Sandy Bottom! Is that not a joke, señor, a good one?"

El patron did not answer. He was glancing incredulously from Tio Felipe to Juan, and then to Salvador and Roberto.

"Do you mean to say that not one of you understands what I am getting at?"

Tio shook his head, bewilderment in his black eyes.

"No, to be honest, señor, I do not know why you ask so many questions, or why it matters where the stream runs—oh, to be sure, all of us in Nueva knew that los Estados Unidos lay across the river—somewhere. A long way off, you understand, señor, at the point where the fence and the soldiers bar the way, and that so troublesome affair of the passports must be gone into."

El patron reached in his pocket for a pencil. Carefully, distinctly, he began to draw on the map. He ringed the hut on the river with a black circle and inside of it he printed the words los Estados Unidos. Then he circled the dot that stood for Nueva, and wrote the name Mejico.

"It is as simple as that," he said gravely, turning to Nita who was watching him with startled, astonished eyes. "You were born on American soil. You are an American citizen."

By this time Lou and her mother and Bill were exchanging excited nods and smiles, and Lou burst out with a wild shriek of "Neets! Neets! Say something, don't just stand there—can't you understand what Pa is telling you?"

Nita had no words to answer. It was dreadful, the way Roberto and Salvador and Juan were staring at her. She had become a foreigner to them, an outsider. A door had slammed in her face.

Yes, and she would lose the Cockerel, too, doubtless, and there would be a tall guarded fence just like the one

at the border between her and dear dear Tio, between her and kind Tia Lupe. Perhaps—perhaps even the pigeons in the plaza would not want to be friends with her any more.

Frightened and confused and rebellious, she threw herself into Tio's arms.

"Don't let the river make any difference! Don't let it, Tio! I am just the same—every bit the same, believe me, Tio, please believe me!"

Tio Felipe held her close, and then he began to scold her, tenderly. "Foolish one! Silly goose—and why should you not be exactly the same? Just try to get out of being our little *sobrina*! Oh yes, we would like to see you try it, wouldn't we Lupe? Now, Nita, do you hear that? Do you hear what Tia says—that she will find it necessary to take a broomstick to your behind if you do not stop talking such nonsense?"

"But—but——"

"There are no buts, *querida*. Nothing is changed, nothing at all. Being born across the river only means that when you grow up you will have the privilege of choosing allegiance to which ever country you love best, los Estados Unidos or Mejico. Which ever you choose, I know that there will always be a big corner in your heart for the other. Neither Nueva nor Rancho Estrellas will be left out in the cold."

With a glance at her blue ruffled skirt, her white blouse, he picked a spray of toyon from the bouquet

that Tia Lupe had set in the middle of the table. Smiling, he stuck the bright berries in her braids.

"Red, white and blue are beautiful colors," he said gently. "Very beautiful, *querida mia*."

The little room was quiet as Tio finished speaking, and then it was Bill who broke the solemn hush by making everyone laugh.

"Wh—ew!" he whistled long and pityingly. "You poor kid! Now you'll have to learn all the words to the *Star Spangled Banner*. But gosh, everybody, gosh! Look out of the window! Look at those ducks swimming our way. Here comes the whole darn Lompo family!"

Every one rushed to the window. Cousin Gordo's little green catarina had chugged up the grade and was parked by the cottage gate. Half a dozen passengers of assorted size and age were piling out and making a hasty dash for shelter and a warm fire.

"I did not tell you that Inez was coming to share our olla, because I was afraid you would not stay," Nita confessed to Lou in a guilty whisper. "Alas, Tio Felipe believes that all families should be gathered together on Christmas, even third cousins, once removed. You do not mind too much?"

"Shucks, no," Lou grinned cheerfully. "You don't think I'd let that little old weasel spoil my fun, do you? I should say not," and screwing her face into a horrible grimace she stuck out her tongue as far as it would go in Inez' direction. No one could see it through the

rain-streaked windowpane, but it gave her tremendous satisfaction and was well worth while.

When all the Lompos had tramped through the door in a flurry of dripping coats and shawls and muddy feet and loudly shouted holiday greetings, Inez strolled over to the two girls as calmly as though she had forgotten entirely about the last day of school and her mischievous magpie chatter.

"Hello, Nita. Hello, Lou. What are you doing, just looking at the rain? Is it not awful the way the water comes down? Do you suppose it will ever stop? I am glad I do not have to live way out here in all this mud and slop."

"Slop?" Lou questioned innocently. "Why, I thought slop was something for pigs to eat."

She turned away, shaking with giggles. Inez glared after her and then she suddenly thrust a little package into Nita's hand.

"Here is a present for you," she said awkwardly. "Nothing much, just something Papa made. Lots of town people came to the shop and ordered them, but this one was left over."

Nita opened the package exclaiming with pleasure.

"Thank you, oh, thank you, ever so much."

Inez watched Nita pin a tiny carved silver sombrero on her blouse and then asked lightly, as though she did not care very much, one way or another, "So you are not mad at me any more?"

Nita finished fastening the clasp of the little pin, and then she looked at Inez with serious, considering eyes.

"No," she answered, shaking her head slowly, "not a bit."

Inez gave something that might have been a sigh of relief, but she smothered it with a gay bold tinkle of laughter and ran off across the room to flaunt her new red dress and jingle her bracelet for the benefit of Roberto and Salvador and the so-handsome young senior Bill.

Nita sighed then, herself. People like Inez were hard to understand. How could they be so nice one time, of the most horrid nature the next? There was not the slightest chance that she could ever learn really to like Inez, but it was true that she could not stay mad on a day like this.

Not in this little cottage that was bursting with laughter and fun. Not with a good dinner, and the olla waiting. Not with the lovely lovely rain drumming on the roof, not with a little golden, star-marked horse lying safe and warm in the barn beside his mother.

No, not while Tio was taking his guitar off the wall and beginning to sing.

As she listened, her feet took a quick dancing step, her skirts flew wide, and then she put her hands to her braids to fasten the toyon berries more firmly.

Lou was smiling at her. Nita knew suddenly that the red, white and blue had made them sisters in a way.

Tio was smiling, too. He had chosen her favorite song. The one whose words went in this manner—‘My heart is like a gourd dipper. It brims to overflowing. Let us dance and clap our hands and make merry. I have happiness in full measure.’

